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Is the Open Method of Coordination in the field of education effective and does it achieve the desired results?

Master Thesis in International Relations

Charlotte Richert – s1266519

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Executive Summary

This thesis provides an analysis of the Open Method of Coordination in the field of education of the European Union. More specifically this thesis aims to demonstrate two aspects. Firstly, whether or not the open method of coordination is effective in the field of education. And secondly, if this method is able to achieve the objectives agreed upon in the field of education. The methods used in order to analyze these two questions include a thorough analysis of what has already been achieved in the field of education prior to the open method of education; an analysis of the open method of education in order to understand what this method has brought to EU education policy and the Member State's policies in education; and finally a country, the Netherlands, analysis that will help answer the research question.

This thesis will find that the open method of coordination is an effective method due to the different governance tools it uses to achieve the different objectives. However, within the field of education it simply does not lead to the desired results. This thesis will demonstrate that it has been very difficult for all of the European Union Member State's to achieve the objectives that they had agreed upon in the field of education. This thesis will illustrate why the open method of coordination is effective but also what has caused this method not to achieve its results in education.

Contents

Introduction

The general terms of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) were first introduced and talked about in the Lisbon European Council meeting in 2000. This meeting further introduced the use of the OMC in education. The OMC in education is used "as a means of spreading best practice and achieving greater convergence towards the main EU goals" (European Council, 2000, para. 37). The main procedure of the OMC in education was defined as

> *"common guidelines to be translated into national policy, combined with periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review organized as mutual learning processes and accompanied by indicators and benchmarks as means of comparing best practice"* (European Council, 2000, art. 37).

Besides those general terms, it was also expressed during the Lisbon European Council meeting that the European Union (EU) education policy was a key area in which the OMC could be applied to. This was reflected in Article 149(1) of the Treaty establishing the European Community (TEC), now referred to as Article 165(1) in the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), in which it states that:

> *The Union shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity* (European Union, 2010, pp.87).

This article was added eight years prior to the Lisbon European Council meeting, in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. This article further enhances the fact that power is given to the EU institutions in the field of education policy making, but makes it clear that this power remains limited. The EU institutions can only encourage the cooperation between the Member States and, when necessary, support and supplement the Member State's actions. The institutions are also to respect and not intervene with the teaching and education system content, as those also lay within the Member States jurisdiction. Under this article, the EU institutions have no formal law-making power as those remain within the Member States. This is best known under the principle of subsidiarity and proportionality. The principle of subsidiarity is Article 5 (3) TFEU and clearly states that:

> *Under the principle of subsidiarity, in areas which do not fall within its exclusive competence, the Union shall act only if and in so far as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States, either at central level or at regional and local level, but can rather, be better achieved at Union level* (TEC 1992).

The field of education falls under this article as it is not an exclusive competence of the EU. The EU institutions can only act if the objectives proposed cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States. Furthermore, "there is a strong link between education policies and the construction of national identities and sovereignties. Hence, Member States question whether an EU dimension of education policies is really legitimate" (Lange & Alexiadou, 2007, pp. 325). Therefore, as the aim of the OMC is to spread best practices and to achieve greater convergence between the Member States, the use of this method as a governance tool is an appropriate instrument for regulation in areas such as education, where the EU has very limited competence.

The aim of this paper is to firstly analyze the OMC in the field of education, and secondly to focus on early school leaving in the Netherlands from the 2000s until 2014. Subsequently and through this analysis, this paper hopes to demonstrate whether or not this method is effective and if the results have lead to the expectations of the European Commission. Therefore, the research question is:

> *Is the Open Method of Coordination in the field of education effective and does it achieve the desired results?*

In order to answer the research question, this paper will be divided into five chapters. The first chapter will provide a literature review on the research topic. This will give the reader a better idea of what has already been done and researched on this research topic. The second chapter will focus on the methodology of the paper. It will explain the methods used when researching, developing and writing the thesis, as well as explain why those methods were used. Furthermore, the methodology will also provide whether any limitations will be and have been encountered. It will also specify the period that will be analyzed. Chapter three will look at education policy in the EU, and more specifically at the developments of education policies in the EU. It will analyze the period of the Lisbon European Council meeting as it was during that period that education started gaining more importance in the EU institutions. Chapters four and five will be the main focus of this paper. Chapter four will analyze the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the field of education. Finally, in order to answer the research question, chapter five will focus on early school leaving in the Netherlands. By focusing on one objective and one country, this will make it easier to answer the research question and thereby seeing whether or not the objectives set out by the European Commission were to their expectations and to see whether the OMC achieved the desired results. The period studied here will be from the 2000s until approximately 2014.

Working questions

To be able to answer the research question, various working questions have been chosen. Firstly, it is essential to have a better understanding of what has caused education to become such an important field for EU institutions and Member States. Secondly, it is important to know what were the causes of introducing the OMC in the field of education. Therefore, chapter three will seek to answer the following questions:

- What has the Lisbon summit brought to education policy in the EU?
- What role does the European Commission have in the field of education?
- Why was the OMC introduced in the field of education? What are the causes?

After having introduced the OMC in chapter three, the method will have to be thoroughly analyzed. Therefore, the following questions will be answered in chapter four:

- Is the OMC an efficient way to encourage policy learning amongst the Member States?
- What do the progress reports tell us about the performance of the EU in the field of education?
- Is it efficient for the European Commission to compare results and scores given to the Member States?
- Does this comparison facilitate mutual learning by the mean of peer review?

Finally, the main focus of this paper is early school leaving in the Netherlands. Over the past ten years, the Netherlands has been very successful in the field of education and especially in early school leaving, one of the five benchmarks of the 2010 and 2020 Education and Training Programme. Therefore, the following questions will be answered in chapter five:

- What are the successful dropout prevention measures set up in the Netherlands?

- Are the good results in early school leaving due to the OMC and the European Commission?
- Has there been a decrease in early school dropout in the EU since the implementation of the OMC?
- Will all of the Member States achieve the guidelines provided by the European Commission in the field of education, and more specifically in early school leaving?
- Is the OMC an effective method in the field of education?

As a final point, a clear and thorough conclusion will be provided at the end of this paper.

Chapter One: Literature Review

This first chapter, the literature review, is there to help us have a better understanding of the OMC in the field of education. More specifically, the chapter is meant to analyze what has already been researched on and written about the research topic. Quite surprisingly, not a lot of literature can be found on the OMC in education. Most literature focuses on the OMC and whether it is a new form of EU governance or not. Therefore, instead of analyzing the OMC in the field of education, this chapter will analyze the OMC as a whole. The literature review will be split into three parts. The first part will look at the 'criticism' or general observations and thoughts given on what the OMC actually is. The second part will look at the debate between soft law vs. hard law. Some scholars argue that the OMC is simply soft law, while others argue that there are some aspects of hard law being implemented. The last section of the review will look at the debate on diversity vs. convergence. The OMC is meant to be diverse as the Member States are intended to form their own kind of policies. However, at the same time, the OMC pushes for convergence too, as it sets common goals for the Member States to reach.

The Open Method of Coordination

The OMC is a new form of EU governance, which helps Member States design their own policies. Furthermore, the formation of these new policies is also meant for the Member States to actively engage in "collective action to foster compatibility, consistency or convergence between member states' public policies" (Gornitzka, 2005, pp. 4). This method involves:

- *Fixing guidelines for the Union combined with specific timetables for achieving the goals which they set in the short, medium and long terms;*
- *Establishing, where appropriate, quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks against the best in the world and tailored to the needs of different Member States and sectors as a means of comparing best practice;*
- *Translating these European guidelines into national and regional policies by setting targets and adopting measures, taking into account national and regional differences;*
- *Periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review organized as mutual learning process* (European Council, 2000, §37).

According to Ase Gornitzka (2005) there is some room for criticism. She argues that even though this new form of governance was launched in order to learn and solve mutual problems, it is not framed by any formal constraints or legal sanctions. This means that if the Member States do not reach the set goals, no form of sanctions will be applied. So the question Gornitzka asks herself is do the Member States have an actual incentive to reach these goals? Furthermore, Gornitzka argues that the OMC is quite general, and it does not elaborate on any clear steps or specific procedural arrangements of the method. Even though this observation seems quite negative, Grainne de Burca and Jonathan Zeitlin (2003) argue that this is part of the flexibility method of the OMC, meaning that there is not one form of OMC but that the method exists in several versions. Therefore, there is always room for flexibility. De Burca and Zeitlin are not the only scholars that argue this point. Bettina Lange & Nafsika Alexiadou (2007) further argues that one of the key characteristics of the OMC is flexibility. They argue that the OMC is flexible due to the fact that it relies on soft law. This will be thoroughly looked at in the next section of the literature review. Just like de Burca and Zeitlin, Lange & Alexiadou confirm that the OMC exists in several versions and that the OMC varies according to the specific policy field and time in which it is employed (Lange & Alexiadou, 2007, pp. 322).

On a completely different note, but still involving the OMC, there is room to assess how rapidly scholars, academics and general political commentators went from being very positive about the OMC to being quite negative. According to Jonathan Zeitlin (2009), “many academic and political commentators embraced the OMC as a suitable instrument for identifying and pursuing common European concerns while respecting legitimate national diversity” (Zeitlin, n.d. pp. 2). This means that the Member States are committed to working together in order to reach the goals and targets set by the OMC. Zeitlin continues his argument by stating that other academics and political commentators “viewed the OMC as a promising mechanism for promoting experimental learning and deliberative problem solving across the EU, because it systematically and continuously obliged Member States to pool information, compare themselves to one another, and reassess current policies against their relative performance” (Zeitlin, n.d. pp.2). Therefore due to these reasons and positive reactions from various scholars, the OMC was the ideal method to use for EU policy making in areas that were domestically sensitive, complex and where the basis of the Treaty for Community action was weak (Zeitlin, n.d. pp.2-3). However, as soon as it was noticed that the OMC diffused rapidly from policy area to policy area, there were some great concerns that such soft-law approach was a threat to the initial community method of European integration (Zeitlin, n.d. pp. 3). The Commission, the European Parliament and other EU institutions mostly initiated this threat by demanding, "that the OMC should not be used when legislative action under the community method is possible" (Zeitlin, n.d. pp. 3). Therefore it can be assumed that these institutions believed that the soft law instrument, in this case the OMC, would replace the hard law instrument, that is the legislative actions that are already under the community method. This assumption, however, will be further analyzed in the following section.

Overall, even though some scholars argue that the OMC does not have any specific guidelines and that maybe it should have clearer terms, others believe that this is good because it allows the OMC to be flexible. The OMC is not a method that should be used for only one kind of policy area, but the method should be used in all kinds of policy areas. If this is what the OMC is meant to be, then flexibility is definitely a crucial key characteristic of the method. The OMC is not meant to be a one-size-fits-all method but is a flexible governance tool that can be used and applied in various policy areas.

Soft law vs. hard law

As mentioned above, one of the key characteristics of the OMC is its flexibility due to the fact that it uses soft law. EU soft law uses "recommendations, opinions, reports, joint communications of the Commission and Educational Council, and action plans as a traditional form for exercising governmental power. On the other hand, hard law (EU treaty articles, directives and regulations), creates legally binding obligations for member states and individuals" (Lange & Alexiadou, 2007, pp. 322-323). However, there are some disagreements between scholars considering the fact that OMC only uses soft law. Lange & Alexiadou (2007) argue that the OMC only uses and relies on soft law as a form of governance. They continue by arguing that having such reliance on soft law has consequences on the distribution of powers within the EU institutions:

> *Where the European Commission particularly relies on traditional 'soft' law measures [...], the role of the Commission and thus supranationalism in the EU are reinforced. Here, soft law measures are often derived from initiatives of the European Council and the Council of Ministers. This increases the role for member states in EU policy-making process and hence strengthens intergovernmentalism in the EU* (Lange & Alexiadou, 2007, pp. 323).

On the other hand, Claudio Radaelli (2003) argues that using soft law in the OMC often leads to the creation of directives and regulations[1]. For example, "in direct taxation, the soft-law mechanisms of the OMC are nested into a wider package containing two directives. In pensions, an embryonic form of OMC has been accompanied by the draft occupational pensions directive presented by the Commission in 2002" (Radaelli, 2003, pp. 22-23)[2]. As mentioned earlier, the OMC is only used in areas where the EU institutions do not have an exclusive competences. In the two examples provided above, both taxation and pensions remain under the sole responsibility of the Member States. However, because soft law and especially the OMC have been used in those two fields, Radaelli has been arguing that the EU was able to use hard law too through the creation of directives in those two areas. According to the EU it was essential to create these directives in order to make the OMC work in those two fields.

As stated previously, the use of soft law in the OMC has been considered as a threat by numerous EU institutions. Some scholars believe that the use of soft law in the OMC has replaced other forms of governance such as "legislation, social dialogue, Community action programs and the structural fund" (Zeitlin, n.d. pp. 3) and have argued that

> *"the OMC's rapid diffusion led to widely voiced concerns that such 'soft-law' procedures could represent a threat to the 'Community Method' of European integration, based on binding legislation initiated by the Commission, enacted by the Council and Parliament, and enforced by the Court of Justice. It (the OMC) has equally been considered a threat to the alternative method of EU social legislation, introduced by the Treaty of Maastricht, whereby the European social partners negotiate framework agreements on issues proposed by the Commission, which are then approved as legally binding Council directives, and implemented by the Member States either through transposition into domestic legislation or through encompassing collective agreements at national level"* (Zeitlin, n.d. pp. 3).

What is assumed here is that hard law is being replaced by soft law. However, this was not the OMC's intention. Still according to Zeitlin, the OMC should have been considered as being part

[1] This is not the case in the field of education, but directives and regulations have been created in the field of direct taxation for example.

[2] See Appendix A for clarifications on why directives were issued for direct taxation

of the all of the EU policy tools. These policy tools include legislation, social dialogue, Community action programmes and the structural funds (Zeitlin, n.d. pp. 3). The OMC should have never been considered as a tool to replace all of those tools mentioned above that were already previously set up.

A final observation concerning soft law but that hasn't been pointed out by any scholars yet is whether using soft law is really effective. When using soft law, there are no types of constraints or legal sanctions imposed on the Member States. Gornitzka pointed this out too. So because soft law is only based on recommendations, reports and opinions, it does not require the Member States to follow these recommendations. The Member States can ignore these recommendations. However, when using hard law, the Member States are obliged to incorporate the directives and regulations in their national law. If the Member States do not do so, sanctions will be applied. So it can be assumed that there might not be any real incentive for the Member States to actually meet the goals and objectives set up in the OMC, since if they do not meet them no sanctions will be applied. However, this is just an observation and there is no real evidence that this is true. The Member States are actually very eager to meet the goals and objectives, as this will be proven in chapters four and five.

Diversity vs. convergence

The OMC promotes both diversity and convergence. Diversity is promoted by pushing the Member States to form their own policies, at their own pace but by still following a specific timetable. Convergence is promoted by having common EU goals and objectives for the Member States to reach. One scholar, Radaelli, believes that this is quite contradictory:

> *"There is contradiction between the emphasis on the method as an instrument used by Member States to develop 'at their own pace' and the objective need to steer the process of policy change in the direction of 'convergence towards the EU goals'"* (Radaelli, 2003, pp. 27).

However, two other scholars, de Burca and Zeitlin (2003), believe that this is one of the strengths of the OMC:

> *"Because the OMC encourages convergence of national objectives, performance and policy approaches rather than specific institutions, rules and programmes, this mechanism is particularly well suited to identifying and advancing the common*

> *concerns and interests of the Member States while simultaneously respecting their autonomy and diversity"* (De Burca & Zeitlin, 2003, pp. 2).

It definitely is a strength for the OMC to be able to promote both diversity and convergence. It is also a strength for the Member States because even though each Member State is working on their own policies, they are able to share information and compare themselves to one another and assess their policies against their relative performance (De Burca & Zeitlin, 2003, pp.2). This leads the Member States to work closely together in order to solve problems and to learn from other EU countries at EU level. This general belief is shared by another scholar, Erika Szyszczak (2006), who argues that the OMC is a contributor "to a common discourse, a common language and a common identification of a particular problem and the diffusion of shared beliefs, the acceptance of common problems and shared beliefs as to what is 'good policy' and what is 'bad policy'" (Szyszczak, 2005, pp. 489). This type of reasoning reflects the meaning of diversity within the OMC. Szyszczak is also in accordance with convergence within the OMC. She agrees with the fact that once the good performance and bad performance have been identified, this can lead to the convergence of policies and to policy transfers.

Overall it can be said that diversity and convergence of the OMC are quite beneficial to the Member States. On the one hand it pushes Member States to form their own type of policies, by following benchmarks and clear timeframes. While on the other, it pushes Member States to work together and see whether the policies adopted by the Member States really work. It is in this way that problems can be spotted and solutions can be found. In this way, the variety of different policies in Member States enables Member States to get inspired and to follow (parts of a) good working policy.

Conclusion

This first chapter has helped us to have a better understanding of the OMC, and what has already been said on the research topic. Firstly, it can be concluded that the OMC has had some positive general observations. Although some scholars believe that the general terms provided by the European Council are too broad, other scholars believe that those broad terms are quite a positive thing because it gives the OMC more flexibility. With more flexibility, this method can be used in all policy areas.

Secondly, the OMC has been 'criticized' for only using soft law, which means that in case Member States do not reach the goals, no sanctions will be imposed. Other scholars argue that not only soft law is being applied but also some aspects of hard law. This was illustrated with a clear example on taxation and pensions, two fields in which only Member States have competences, but where directives have been implemented[3]. The use soft law in the OMC has also been considered as a threat by some EU institutions. These institutions, such as the Commission and the European Parliament, believe that other forms of governance tools are being omitted, and that only the OMC is being used. However, this was never the intention of the OMC. The idea was to use all of the governance tools that already exist.

Finally, the debate between diversity vs. convergence was also looked at. The OMC is promoting diversity since the Member States are meant to form their own policies, at their own pace while still following a specific timeframe and benchmarks. Furthermore, the OMC also pushes for convergence, as common EU goals have been set up. This debate has generally received some positive observations because it pushes Member States to work together, to analyze each other's policies and in case of problems, to try to find adequate solutions by looking at the policies established by other Member States.

[3] See Appendix A for clarifications on why directives were issued for direct taxation

Chapter Two: Methodology

In this chapter, I present my methodology. There are two purposes of this chapter. The first purpose is to explain what methods I intend to use when researching, developing and writing my thesis. The second purpose is to explain what research method I used to collect the information and data needed to answer the research question. Therefore, this chapter will be split into three sections. Firstly, the theoretical approach will be discussed. This will inform the choice of method and the approach used to interpret the data and information found. This will relate explicitly to the research question and working questions introduced in the introduction.

Secondly, I will discuss the empirical approach used to this thesis. The data and information that will be analyzed will mostly be quantitative material. This will be very useful when looking at the early school leaving prevention measures the Netherlands implemented in order to reach the OMC benchmarks. Furthermore, it will help us answer the question whether the OMC in the field of education is able to reach the desired results. Finally, the last section will look at the limitations of the research. Even though it is too early to analyze the results of the Europe 2020 goals, this paper will still focus on those goals and the Lisbon Strategy[4]. However, the period and results that will be analyzed will be from the 2000s up until approximately 2013-2014. Hence, a period of approximately fourteen years will be thoroughly looked at.

It is important to point out that the overall methodological approach used is deductive. Deductive reasoning is a type of reasoning that goes from a general topic or statement to a specific conclusion. This approach will be analyzed in chapters three, four and five. In chapters three and four, I will look at education policy in the EU and then look at whether the OMC works within education. In this manner, I will then be able to analyze whether the OMC works within education by looking more specifically at early school leaving in the Netherlands. This will answer the first section of my research question. What then remains to be analyzed is whether the OMC has achieved the desired results.

Theoretical approach

The theoretical framework of the OMC provides approaches and instruments that are relevant in order to analyze whether this method works in the field of education. As previously stated in the literature review, the OMC is not one single method. It is a method that can be applied for

[4] See Appendix B for an explanation of the Lisbon Strategy

various fields and areas and can be easily adapted. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze the framework of the OMC. The approach that will be used to do so will be more of an analytical approach than a descriptive approach. The research question and working questions will have to be analyzed by looking at specific data and information. This data and information will be found on the university catalogue, as well as original documents and reports from the EU institutions and the Dutch government. For this type of research, it is simply not possible to just describe what is found. Some critical analysis needs to be done in order to have some solid conclusions.

Furthermore, the main concern of this research paper is whether the OMC works in education and if it achieves the desired results. As the OMC uses peer review and naming and shaming, we will have to look at whether that works. Is it efficient for the European Commission to compare the Member States results? Does this comparison, and keeping a score board of the good performances and bad performances, facilitate the mutual learning by the mean of peer learning? Do Member States collaborate more and work together more to achieve the education goals? It is very important to look at these various working questions in order to answer the research question.

Therefore, the best methodological approach would be to have a thorough analysis of education policies in the European Union, to look at the OMC in education and then to have a case study on early school leaving in the Netherlands, in order to provide some clear evidence and answer to the research question.

Empirical approach

The material used plays a crucial role to answer the research question, as well as the working questions mentioned in the introduction. The material should help us make an in-depth analysis of the education policies in the EU, of the OMC in education and of early school leaving in the Netherlands. This section will therefore discuss the empirical material used in this thesis.

The use of primary sources, such as original documents from the EU institutions and original reports from the Dutch government, will be used for chapters four and five. For those chapters we need accurate information coming from the institutions of the EU themselves and from the Dutch government. For example, when it comes to analyzing the prevention measure taken by the Netherlands on early school leaving, it is essential to have the actual reports set out by the Dutch government. Furthermore, it is also important to have the overall progress report from the

European Commission on the Netherlands in order to see whether or not the OMC is effective. From those progress reports, we can also analyze whether the Netherlands is heading towards the right direction. All of these sources will be obtained from the Internet. Besides primary sources, secondary sources will be reviewed and used too. This will be obtained from the university catalogue database.

Unfortunately, time did not allow for interviews. Interviews would have been very beneficial for this paper, as it could have provided a more critical analysis and actual thoughts on the subject. However efforts to actually have interviews have been made. Paul Holdsworth, head of sector of adult learning and continuing vocational education and training, was contacted but the time given for him to answer some questions was too limited. He did provide some excellent articles for this thesis and gave his general thoughts on some questions too.

Limitations

At first, the aim was to analyze the OMC in the Europe 2020 strategy. However, as this strategy only started taking place four years ago, it is going to be too challenging to analyze the OMC in education for that period. It will not give us accurate conclusions if only those four years are analyzed. Therefore, in order to have an accurate conclusion and accurate results to the research question, the period and years have been altered. The paper will focus on the years from 2000 up until 2014. This was also the period in which the institutions of the EU discussed that the education area should make use of the OMC. As previously stated, this was discussed during the Lisbon European Council meeting. Hence, a period of approximately 14 years will be analyzed in this paper.

Another limitation that I have come across is the lack of prior research studies on the topic. There is plenty of research on the OMC and on education, but there is very little research on the OMC in the field of education. This has come quite as a surprise since the OMC has been used in education for the past 14 years. Therefore, I strongly believed that there would have been more research done on the topic. However and on a more positive note, there is plenty of research on early school leaving in the Netherlands and in the EU. This will definitely be very helpful and useful for chapter five of this thesis.

Chapter Three: Education Policy in the European Union

The EU's involvement in the Member State's education policy does not come from the Lisbon Strategy. Prior to the Lisbon Strategy, the EU institutions and the Member States cooperated on a number of programmes. This cooperation was possible due to Article 149 TEC:

> *"The Union shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between the Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity"* (Art. 149 TEC)

This article demonstrates that in the EU, the Member States are the only ones responsible for their education systems and programmes and the EU institutions only have a supporting role. Additionally, if the EU wishes to take action within this field, the Union should aim at:

a) Developing the European dimension in education
b) Encouraging mobility of students and teachers
c) Promoting cooperation between educational establishments
d) Developing exchanges of information and experiences
e) Encouraging the development of youth exchanges
f) Encouraging the development of distance education (Art. 149 2 TEC)

Even though the EU institutions only have a supporting role in this field, this has not prevented the institutions from cooperating with the Member States. The first education programme where the EU institutions and the Member States cooperated was the COMETT programme, in which its main objective was to "strengthen cooperation between universities and enterprises in training relating to technology" (European Commission, n.d.). This programme was adopted in 1987. This cooperation continued throughout the 1990s where the EU institutions and the Member States used the 'programme-approach'. Instead of working on policies, the EU initiated a number of programmes and projects in order to have greater convergence in education between the Member States. The EU has done so by offering project funding. Besides the COMETT programme, the most well known programme is the ERASMUS programme, which provides university exchange options for students in the EU and involves the best universities across the world. Another successful programme is TEMPUS, which "enables universities from EU

Member States to cooperate with those in the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and central Asia, and the Mediterranean partner countries in higher education modernization projects" (Ertl, 2006, pp. 13). Furthermore, the EU institutions also focused on two main objectives: "the promotion of new technologies in learning process and the increase of mobility within the EU" (Erlt, 2006, pp. 13). The second objective was quite important during that period because it permitted the establishment of the recognition of professional qualifications throughout the EU. Recognizing professional diplomas and qualifications throughout the EU has allowed citizens to work in other Member States.

All EU Member States, with the support of the EU institutions, adopted these programmes. For example, the European Parliament was the institution that made the budget available in order to support the implementation of these programmes in the Member States. However, these were just programmes that the EU institutions and the Member States cooperated on and implemented. Over the years, the EU institutions have always wanted to go further and deeper in this field but the Member States were always reluctant. "Member States had been unwilling to transfer further legal competencies to the European level while at the same time there was an expectation for the Union to take common action and deliver" (Gornitzka, 2006, pp.11). Furthermore, according to Hubert Ertl (2006) the EU projects that were established at the end of the 1990s were dominated by the restrictions posed by the principle of subsidiarity (Art. 6 TFEU) and the principle of non-harmonization. Therefore, due to these restrictions, the EU institutions had to put aside the 'programme-approach' and work towards a 'target/objective-approach'. Consequently, the EU institutions focused more on setting objectives and on monitoring the progress of those objectives set. Additionally, over the last 20 years, education policy has taken greater importance within the EU. The EU's interest in education policy became more apparent during and after the Lisbon Strategy in 2000. This summit was a turning point in education policy for both the EU institutions and the Member States as it introduced a new method - the OMC.

The Lisbon Strategy – A Turning Point in Education policy

Education policy has been the center of attention of the Lisbon Strategy. Firstly, the Lisbon conclusions introduced specific educational benchmarks and guidelines in the field of education. The three most important aims and guidelines set out in the Lisbon conclusions for education are:

- *a substantial annual increase in per capita investment in human resources;*
- *the number of 18 to 24 years olds with only lower-secondary level education who are not in further education and training should be halved by 2010;*
- *a European framework should define the new basic skills to be provided through lifelong learning* (European Council, 2000, par. 26).

The second aspect laid down in the Lisbon conclusions is the invitation of the Ministers of Education to reflect on common objectives for educational systems in Europe (Hingel, 2001, pp. 12). Anders Hingel, who was then the head of education policy at the European Commission, declares in his report that

> *"Since the very beginning of European cooperation in the field of education, Ministers of Education have underlined the diversity of their systems of education. The very reason why they met was in fact that their systems were diverse. Any mentioned of 'common denominators' was considered of lesser importance and mainly used in National debates. The Lisbon conclusions break with this by asking the Ministers to concentrate their reflection on what is common. [] The Lisbon conclusions implicitly give the Union the mandate to develop a common interest approach in education going beyond national diversities as can already be seen in the demand to Ministers of Education to debate common objectives of educational systems. This mandate will lead to an increase in the European dimension of national educational policies."* (Hingel, 2001, pp. 12 & 14).

The fact that the conclusions of the Lisbon Strategy has asked the Ministers of Education to reflect on the possibility of working together on common goals is already a big step for the future of education policy. At the time, reflecting did not necessarily mean implementing new policies especially in a field where the Member States are the ones responsible for the making of policies. However, the Lisbon Strategy, and especially the fact that the Ministers of Education were asked to reflect more on this field, has lead to the establishment and use of the ***open method of coordination in the field of education***. Following this reflection, the Ministers of Education created the Working Programme for 2010, better known as Education and Training 2010. After some reflection, the Ministers of Education agreed to three overall objectives in the field of education:

1) *"Increasing the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU*
2) *Facilitating the access to all education and training systems*
3) *Opening up education and training systems to the world"* (Hingel, 2001, pp. 14).

According to Novoa and deJong-Lambert (2002), the main purpose of this programme "is to organize EU educational standards into a single comprehensive strategy, consisting of two types of activity; work on common challenges and efforts to utilize the potential of transnational activities in education and training". Through the use of the OMC, indicators and benchmarks were established in order to measure the progress of the Member States in education policy. The five benchmarks of the Education and Training 2010 are:

- *"By 2010, an EU average of no more than 10% early school leavers should be achieved*
- *By 2010, the total number of graduates in mathematics, science and technology should increase by at least 15% and gender imbalance should decrease*
- *By 2010, 85% of 22 year olds should have achieved upper secondary education*
- *By 2010, the percentage of low-achieving 15 year olds in reading literacy should have decreased by at least 20% compared to the year 2000*
- *By 2010, the average participation in lifelong learning should be at least 12.5% of the adult working age population (25-64 age group)"* (European Council, 2003, pp. 6 – 10).

In order to achieve these benchmarks, the European Commission, the European Council and the Member States agreed to use the open method of coordination (OMC). This is where the European Commission played an important role as it translated the OMC into the education policy context.

The role of the European Commission in Education Policy

Within the European Commission, there is a special directorate who is in charge of education, training, culture, sports, languages and youth. This directorate is the Directorate General for Education and Culture, DG EAC. Briefly, "in the field of education and training, DG EAC, is responsible for the development of evidence-based policy and the management of initiatives in support of education and training across Europe" (European Commission, 2014). Furthermore, its main responsibility is to support the Member States "in developing coherent policies in schools, vocational education and training, higher education and adult education" (European Commission, 2014). However, this is all very general and the European Commission itself has a much more important and stronger role in education policy and especially in the OMC.

Firstly, when the OMC was first introduced in the field of education, it was the European Commission that had the responsibility to translate that method into the education policy context of the EU. "The Commission underlined the need for common action and urgent reforms in the Member States in order to achieve the goals outlined for 2010" (Gornitzka, 2006, pp. 16). However, these common actions had to fully respect Article 149 of the TEC, and therefore the use of the OMC was considered as the best solution as it was described by the European Council as "a fully decentralized approach […] applied in line with the principle of subsidiarity in which the Union, the Member States, the regional and local levels, as well as the social partners and civil society, are actively involved, using variable forms of partnership" (European Council, 2000, art. 38). One could argue that giving the European Commission the responsibility to translate the OMC in education has provided the European Commission with a stronger position as both "agenda-setter and organizer of the EU education policy area" (Munkholm & Olsen, 2009, pp. 20).

Secondly, in education policy, one of the roles of the European Commission is to work closely with the Member States in order to develop their educational system. As previously stated, each Member State has the responsibility to organize the content of their educational programme, but there are advantages to work together with the European Commission, especially on those common issues (illustrated in the Europe and Training 2010, and Europe and Training 2020 Programmes) that each Member State have. Therefore, *"the European Commission supports national efforts in two main ways:*

1) *The Commission works closely with national policy-makers to help them develop their school education policies and systems. It gathers and shares information and analysis and encourages the exchange of good policy practices through the schools policy thematic working groups.*
2) *Through the Erasmus + programme, it invests millions of euros each year in projects that promote exchanges, school development, the education of school staff, school assistantships etc"* (European Commission, 2014).

Thirdly, another role of the European Commission is to “act as a partnership with national governments, employers’ and workers’ groups and countries outside the EU to improve the quality of training, improve the quality of teachers, trainers and other professional in the sector and make courses more relevant to the labour market” (European Commission, 2014). Fourthly, the European Commission also works closely with policy-makers so that the policies proposed are always in line with, for example, the Educational and Training 2010 Programme and the Europe 2020 Strategy. Once policies have been decided on, the European Commission always proposes a series of policy documents that need to be reviewed by the European Parliament. Finally, one role that will be described in the next chapter is the annual progress reports the European Commission makes. It is quite an important role as the European Commission formulates progress reports for each individual Member States in order to see whether or not the Member States will be able to achieve the objectives set. In these progress reports, the European Commission always provides a section on the improvements required so that the country can reach the targets. However, it is important to keep in mind that if the objectives in education policy, more specifically in the Lisbon Strategy and Europe 2020 Strategy, are not met the European Commission *cannot* impose any sanctions on the Member States.

Having looked at the Lisbon Strategy and the role of the European Commission, the next chapter will focus in greater detail on the OMC in education. This was a little bit illustrated in this chapter, but a much thorough analysis will be needed in order to answer the research question.

Chapter Four: The Open Method of Coordination in Education

The Lisbon Strategy introduced the use of the OMC in education. The OMC in education is used "as a means of spreading best practice and achieving greater convergence towards the main EU goals" (European Council, 2000, para. 37). The main procedure of the OMC in education was defined as

> *"common guidelines to be translated into national policy, combined with periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review organized as mutual learning processes and accompanied by indicators and benchmarks as means of comparing best practice"* (European Council, 2000, art. 37).

The guidelines, the exchanges of experiences and the peer learning activities are all up to the Member States and for them to decide on how much they are willing to invest in their participation in reaching the objectives. Furthermore, when it comes to sharing experiences this does not mean that the Member States are to translate the experiences of other Member States in their national domestic context. This makes a lot of sense, as what works for one country does not necessarily work for another. The table below represents the OMC benchmarks from the 2010 Education and Training and 2020 programme that needed to be reached by 2010, and that still needs to be reached by 2020 in all Member States.

Benchmarks to be achieved by	
2010	**2020**
85% of 20-24 year olds should have achieved upper secondary education	At least 95% of children between the age four and the age for starting compulsory primary school should participate in early childhood education
The total number of graduates in mathematics, science and technology should increase by 15%	The share of 15-year olds with insufficient abilities in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%
Early school leavers should represent an EU MS average rate of no more than 10% of 18-24 year olds	The share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%
The percentage of low achievers in reading should have decreased by at least 20% compared to 2000	The share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%
12.5% of 25-64 year olds should participate in lifelong learning in the EU on average	An average of at least 15% of adults (age group 25-64) should participate in lifelong learning

Table 4.1: Data retrieved from CEDEFOP EUROPA[5]

These benchmarks are used as a tool of measurement between the Member States (Munkholm & Olsen, 2009, pp. 22). Strictly speaking, indicators and benchmarks are used for comparing best practices between the Member States. It exposes the Member States in the benchmark where they are good and bad at and further displays to what extent the Member States actually comply with the common objectives.

Before looking at whether the OMC is efficient in encouraging policy learning amongst the Member States, and whether it is efficient for the European Commission to compare the results and scores given to the Member States, it is firstly essential to look at the European Commission's observations of the 2010 and 2020 Education and Training Programmes. What are the general observations of the benchmarks? Are the Member States falling behind, making progress or both, depending on the benchmark? This analysis will provide a very general overview of the OMC and how the Member States are progressing towards reaching the objectives, and more importantly the five benchmarks in education.

European Commission Observations

Annually, the European Commission publishes the indicator and benchmarks report, and biannually it publishes together with the European Council a progress report. It is a general overview of the progress that has been done, as well as the policy areas where positive progress was made and policy area where progress is lacking and reforms need to be taken. The European Commission's observations will be analyzed for the 2010 and 2020 Education and Training Programmes.

Education and Training Programme 2010

During the period 2002-2010, in the reports published by the European Commission and the European Council, more specifically in the 2003, 2004 and 2005 progress reports, it has been observed that there has been a lot of dissatisfaction with the overall progress of the 2010 five benchmarks mentioned in the table on page 25. For instance, in November 2003, the European Commission came to the conclusion that "efforts are being made in all European countries to

[5] http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/statistics-and-indicators/education-and-training-2010-benchmarks.aspx
http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/statistics-and-indicators/education-and-training-2020-benchmarks.aspx

adapt the education and training systems to the knowledge-driven society and economy, but the reforms undertaken are not up to the challenges and their current pace will not enable the Union to attain the objectives set"[6] (Erlt, 2006, pp. 18). In the 2004 European Commission Progress Report the critiques for the five benchmarks were as follows:

- *When it comes to ensuring a significant fall in the rate of* ***early school leavers****, reaching 10% in 2010, experiences during recent years seem to indicate that the benchmark can be reached, but it will require substantial political action and sustained commitment from all countries*
- *It appears from the analysis of existing data that it should be possible to achieve the benchmark set for 2010 to increase the number of* ***graduates in mathematics, science and technology*** *by 15%*
- *The European Union is on track to reach its objectives in relation to the* ***completion of upper secondary education***
- *A major effort is needed to reach the European benchmark concerning* ***low performance in reading literacy*** *among 15 years-olds*
- *Reaching the European benchmark of 12.5% of 25-64 year olds participating in* ***lifelong learning*** *activities by 2010 poses a significant challenge for many European countries* (European Commission, 2004, pp. 5-6).

Overall it seems quite positive and shows that the Member States have made efforts to reach those targets. The European Commission even believes that the first three targets will be achieved by 2010 if the Member States continue on that track. However, the 2005 Progress Report is much more negative and states that progress needs to be made in all five benchmarks. The report concludes that "only the aim to increase the number of graduates in mathematics, science and technology by at least 15% will be reached by 2010" (Ertl, 2006, pp. 18). However, one must be aware of a major difference between the 2004 and 2005 report. Both reports are based on the previous year, 2003 and 2004 respectively. In 2004, 10 new countries entered the European Union, and immediately had to take into consideration the five benchmarks in their respective educational programme. This is probably one of the reasons why the 2005 ptogress

[6] I was unable to find the correct European Commission report of 2003, so had to take the quotation from Erlt.

report received negative observation over the progress of the benchmarks. This negative observation is further backed up by figures 4.1 and 4.2 below. It demonstrates the progress of the five benchmarks and shows the progress line that is required by the Member States if they want to reach all five targets by 2010. Both figures 4.1 and 4.2 below are in accordance with the 2005 progress teports. The first one demonstrates the results up to 2006, and shows that only the mathematics, science and technology (MST) target has already been achieved. Figure 4.2 shows the progress of the five benchmarks up to 2009 that is a year before the Education and Training Programme finished. Just like figure 4.1, figure 4.2 shows that besides the MST targets, none of the other benchmarks were achieved.

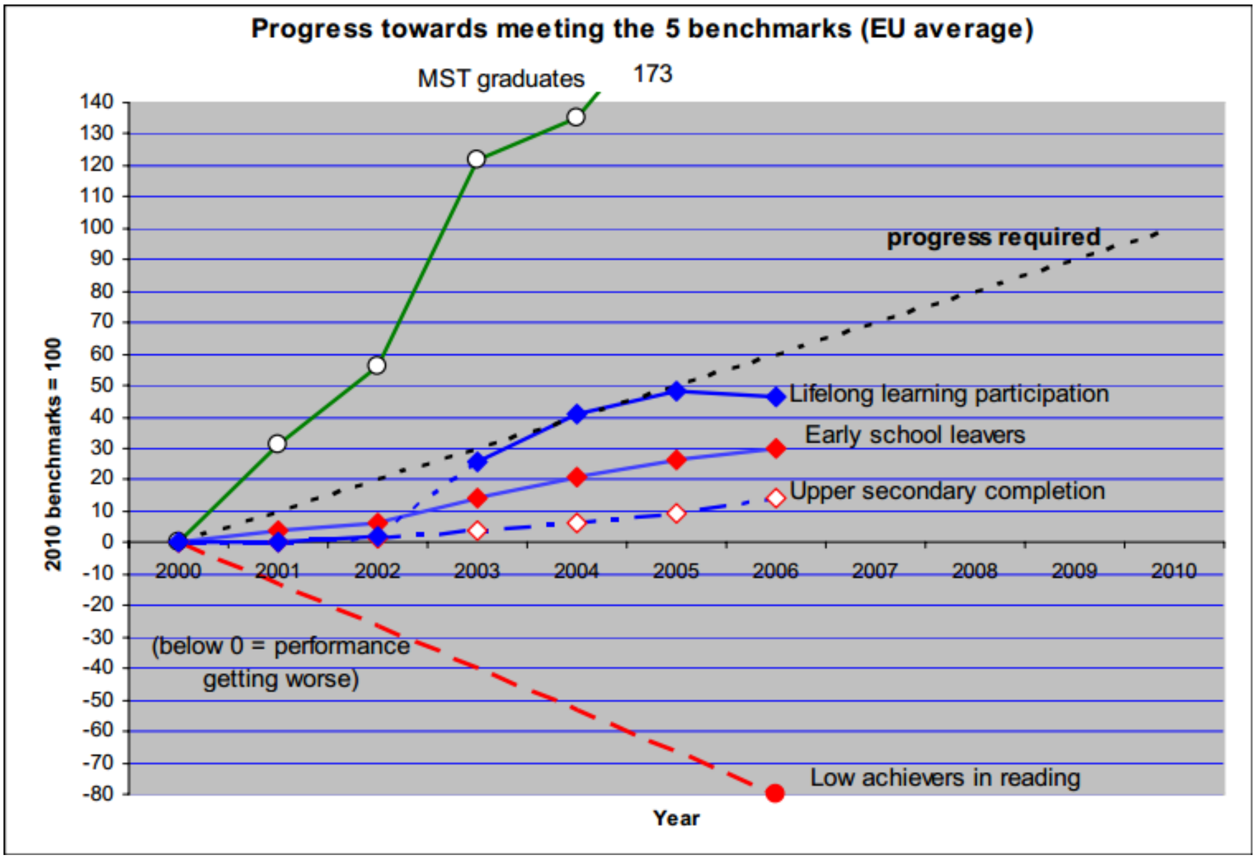
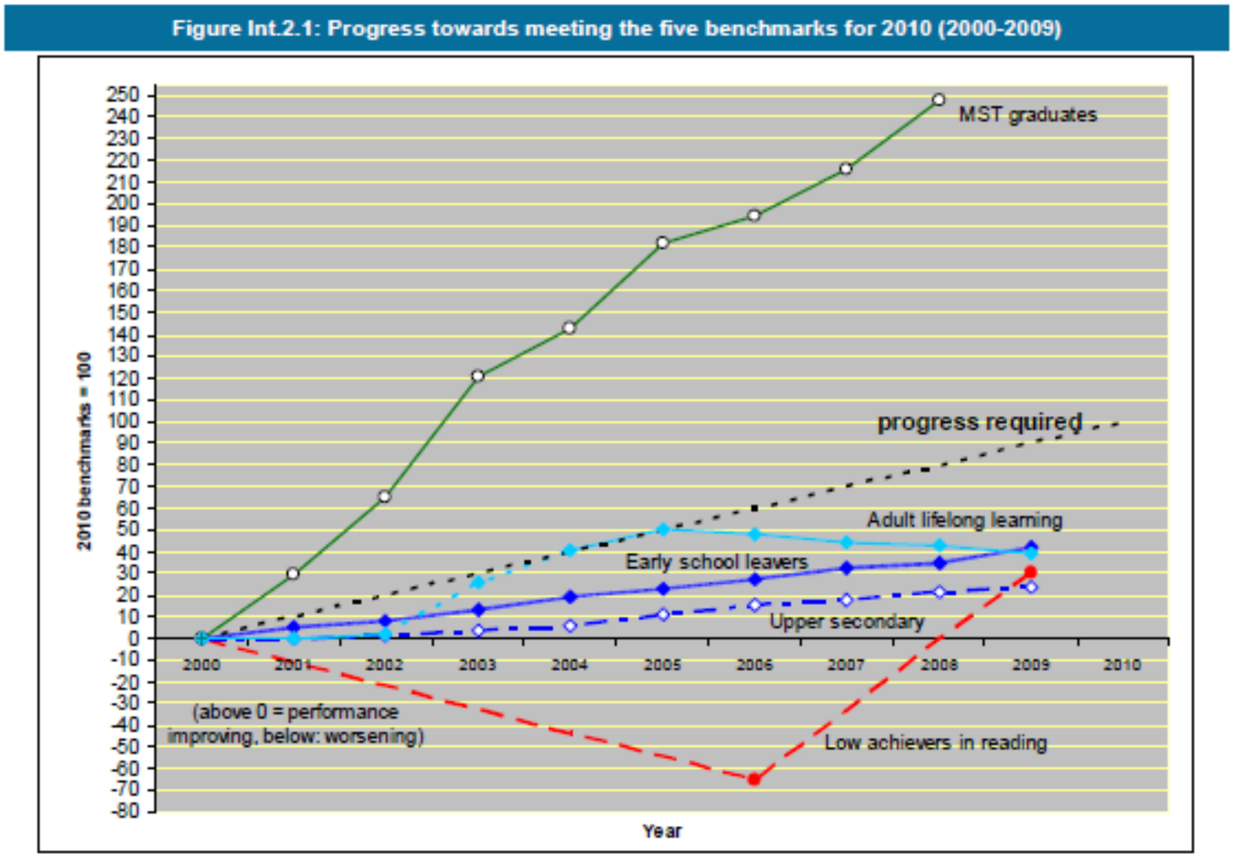


Figure 4.1: Progress towards meeting the 5 benchmarks[7]

[7] http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/projects/events/february_2008/documents/2010.pdf



Source: European Commission DG EAC

Figure 4.2: Progress towards meeting the 5 benchmarks[8]

Finally, the 2008 progress reports states that even though no Member State is falling behind in achieving the objectives, and that each Member States has its strengths and weaknesses in the five benchmarks, the Member States will not be able to achieve four out of the five benchmarks. There is clear evidence of this when looking at figure 4.2. For example, the new Member States (i.e. those who entered the EU in 2004) are performing well in terms of their school systems (i.e. early school leavers and upper secondary education) but are falling behind in lifelong learning participation and MST graduates. On the other hand, the Nordic countries have the highest performance in MST graduates.

Overall, even though the above graphs and the comments received by the European Commission demonstrate that the Member States still required a lot of work back then, it cannot be said that these benchmarks have not been reached. Most of these benchmarks have been translated and

[8] http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/projects/events/february_2008/documents/2010.pdf

used as benchmarks for the Europe and Training Programme for 2020, which is basically an extension of the 2010 Education and Training Programme. Therefore, this is still an ongoing process for the EU institutions and the Member States to work towards meeting the objectives. The Member States must carefully review the progress reports by the European Commission as those provide excellent advice on the measures that need to be taken. Nevertheless, if the Europe and Training Programme for 2010 had not been renewed for another ten years, then the conclusion would have been simple; the Member States would have almost completely failed to reach the objectives.

Education and Training Programme 2020

The Education and Training Programme 2020 is the follow-up strategy of the 2010 Education and Training Programme. As can be seen from table 4.1 on page 25, the education benchmarks that need to be achieved by 2002 are not exactly the same as those from the Lisbon Strategy. The Europe 2020 Strategy started four years ago meaning that there are very little reports on the actual progress. So far, the European Commission and the European Council have published one progress report, and the European Council published one country-specific recommendation paper in 2011. Therefore, the analysis made here will be very general and not as descriptive as for the Lisbon Strategy

Figure 4.3 below represents three out of the five 2020 benchmarks[9]. The trend of the three benchmarks is leading towards the right objectives, and shows that the curves are either increasing or decreasing depending on the target set. This trend has somewhat been reflected in the progress reports, except for the early school leaving (ESL) benchmark. The 2011 Council recommendations state that bringing down the ESL below 10% will be challenging and difficult. Member States should implement coherent, comprehensive and evidence-based strategies in order to achieve that benchmark. Furthermore, those countries that overcome stagnation or where ESL in increasing should double the effort to make further progress. Following the ESL, the tertiary education benchmark is well on its way. Member States are asked to continue making efforts in applying new reforms and modernize their higher educational systems. The third benchmark, lifelong learning is falling a little bit behind, however if the Member States continue on investing in education and training programmes, especially for the unemployed people and

[9] Numbers for compulsory primary school and reading, mathematics and science were not available of Eurostats.

low-skilled workers, the benchmark would still be reachable (European Council & European Commission, 2012, pp.2-5).

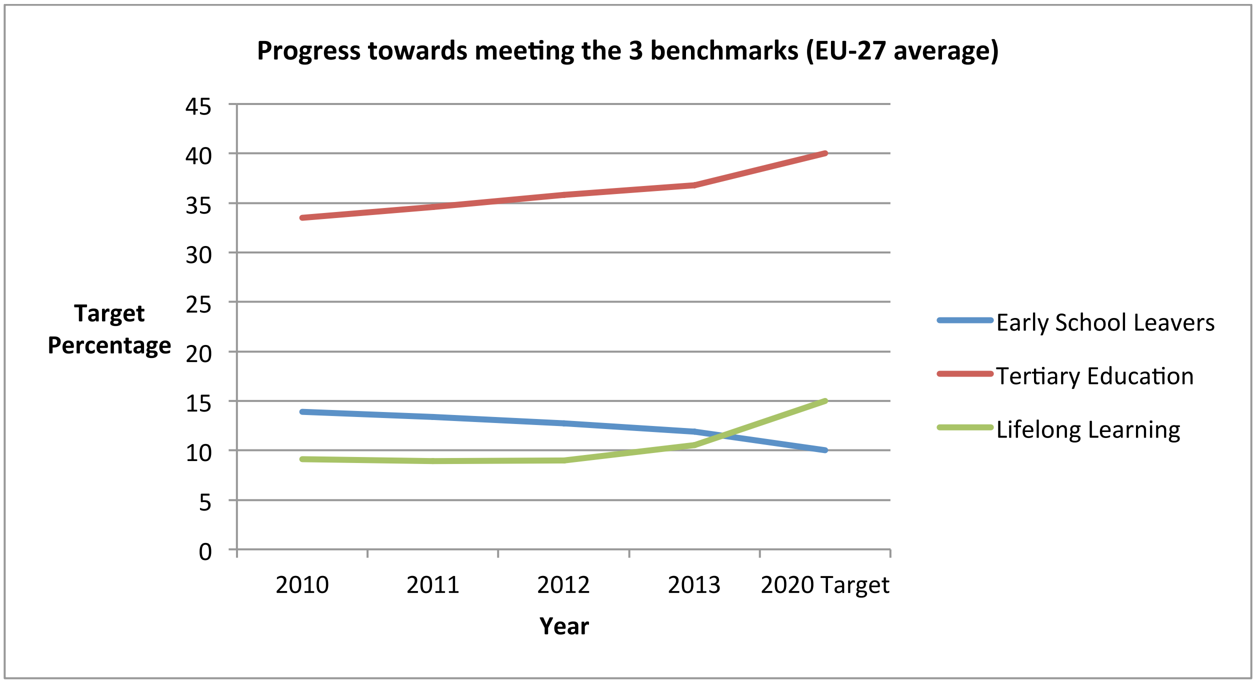


Figure 4.3: Progress towards meeting the 3 out of 5 benchmarks Europe 2020 Strategy[10]

Overall, it has been observed that over the past 14 years, the Member States and the European Commission have achieved quite a number of objectives together and are cooperating and working even more closely to achieve new targets. But is the OMC an efficient way to encourage policy learning amongst the Member States? Is it efficient for the European Commission to compare results and scores given to the Member States? Does this comparison facilitate mutual learning by the mean of peer review?

Encouraging Policy Learning through the OMC

One of the governance tools that the OMC uses is policy learning between the Member States. "The EU institutional framework for policy learning in education is formed by eight so-called clusters, set up by the Commission in 2006" (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010, pp. 446). The topic of each cluster depends on two things. One, on the national priorities of each Member State, and two on the key areas of work established by the European Commission in the Education and

[10] Retrieved July 5, 2014, from the Eurostats Website: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/eurostat/home/

Training 2010/2020 Programmes. The Directorate General of Education and Culture (DG EAC) coordinates the clusters. These clusters form peer-learning activities (PLA's) and Member States can decide whether or not they want to join a PLA. Member States usually join those PLA's they are interested in. What is the aim of a PLA? "It aims to develop mutual learning and to facilitate the exchange of good practice between countries that share similar interests and are focused on quite specific topics of education policy" (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010, pp. 446).

As already noted, the aim of a PLA is to exchange good practice between countries that share similar interests. However, when this cannot be identified "PLAs involve exchange of education practices that have not been necessarily evaluated through either a political process or research" (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010, pp. 452). According to the PLA reports and evaluations, the clusters and peer-learning activities have always been considered as "an effective way of exchanging policy practices and to discuss underlying policy questions" (Schartz, Snoek & Uzerli, 2008, pp. 9). At the end of each clusters and PLA meetings, Member States always report back on their findings that would best fit their national systems. Therefore, the knowledge and findings gained during these meetings can be extremely beneficial for Member States as it can help solve problems in their national education policy. This further demonstrates that Member States are always able to identify some key ideas from other Member States on a national level.

In their *Policy learning and governance of education policy in the EU* paper**,** Lange and Alexiadou identify two ways in which mutual policy learning is context-rich. Only the first way is relevant for this paper.

> *"Mutual policy learning is not just directed at understanding the contents of particular education policies and practices in other member states, but it also seeks to understand the governance mechanisms through which the implementation of a particular education policy or practice becomes successful"* (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010, pp. 452).

Lange and Alexiadou provide an excellent example of this on how the Netherlands implemented their 'Delta Plan' in the 'Mathematics, Science and Technology' cluster. It is revealed that even though the initiative to implement the plan came from the Dutch ministry, the plan itself was implemented *outside* the ministry platform. What Lange and Alexiadou try to demonstrate here is that the involvement of mutual policy learning is not just about understanding different educational policies from the Member States but understanding how those successful educational policies have been implemented and in what context. It is mostly about the whole mechanism behind those successful policies.

Finally, mutual policy learning is also critical upon education policies. During these PLA meetings, Member State's are meant to learn from successful educational policies but are also meant to learn from their failures. "Hence, the aim of mutual policy learning is not simply to identify education policies that can be transferred from one country to another, but for countries to challenge each other's education policies and the assumptions they are based on" (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010, pp. 453). This is especially useful for the so-called 'donor-countries' who often value critical feedback as it helps them to improve their national education policies (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010, pp. 453).

Overall, it can be said that the OMC is an efficient way to encourage mutual policy learning among the Member States. Mutual learning can also be considered as collective learning, because the Member States work together in order to not only pick up on the successful education policies, but also challenge each other in order to improve their national educational systems. Furthermore, having regular PLA meetings is beneficial too as it is a good way to find key solutions to national problems. However, mutual policy learning cannot be considered as a one distinct policy-learning style. Mutual learning differs from cluster to cluster and from PLAs to PLAs.

Besides this governance tool, the European Commission compares scores and results between the Member States. Is this method really efficient? What is the European Commission trying to demonstrate when doing this? And does this method facilitate and lead to mutual learning by the mean of peer review?

Benchmarks, indicators and peer review

The use of benchmarks and targets within the EU is a relatively new phenomenon, but has been on the rise for the last couple of years. Benchmarks and targets are usually used to measure performance. Numerous 'scoreboards' or 'scorecards' have been developed within the EU based on monitoring the Member States and the benchmarks. However, in education, it is extremely difficult to compare data and education systems because education is deeply embedded in the national cultures and traditions of the Member States. So far, in the field of education, Eurydice[11] published one report on the first European scoreboard on mobility. This report is not very relevant for this paper, but concludes, "that no European country performs strongly in all indicators. This means that there is plenty of work for everyone in creating better conditions for mobility" (Crosier & Puhl, 2014).

There are currently no other specific reports on other scoreboards and scorecards in the field of education. This is simply because there are no official tables or indicators "that can be used to shame individual countries into action" (Gornitzka, 2006, pp. 46). The only 'negative' aspect that has been identified is the fact that the progress reports exposes the bad performers, as well as the good performers. However, it has generally been seen that the OMC is not about comparing scores but more about drawing conclusions from evidence about which policy is effective and why. The European Commission states, "the objective of benchmarking of performance and progress in the field of education and training is not to rank Member States, but rather to identify countries which perform well, so that expertise and good practice can be shared with others" (European Commission, 2005, pp. 19). So when the European Commission identifies the three best and worst performers in each benchmark it was done so that Member States can learn from the 'best' rather than shaming individual countries.

Additionally, it is not always the same Member States that are the best or worst performers in the benchmarks, and more specifically in the indicators used to reach those benchmarks. These benchmarks and indicators usually makes Member States perform at least well in one of the benchmark or indicator thereby it cannot clearly distinguish who the general best and worst performers are, as those constantly change over the benchmarks and indicators. Furthermore, it has often been demonstrated in the progress reports, that the Member States are never listed according to their performance. They are listed in either alphabetical order or according to their EU membership status (Gornitzka, 2006, pp.46).

[11] The European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013, published this report. *Towards a Mobility Scoreboard: Conditions for Learning Abroad in Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

The real question that needs to be answered here is *does this 'comparison' facilitate mutual learning by the mean of peer review?*

> *"Peer review can be described as the systematic examination and assessment of the performance of a Member States by other Member States: with the ultimate goal of helping the reviewed Member State improve its policy making, adopt best practices and comply with established standards and principles"* (Pagani, 2002, pp. 15).

Peer review can be extremely effective if the Member States are able to influence and persuade the Member State being reviewed. In order to do this, the Member States usually use 'peer pressure'. This can be done through "a mix of formal recommendations and informal dialogue by the peer countries; public scrutiny, comparisons and, in some cases, even ranking among countries" (Pagani, 2002, pp. 16). As was previously noted, within the field of education there is very little or even no comparison and no ranking among the countries. Recommendations and informal dialogue, as well as the PLAs, are the best forms of peer review the EU uses in education. Therefore, having these peer reviews, the PLA meetings and the clusters in education allows the Member States to learn from on another, to know which policies works best and why, and more importantly the Member States receive a better understanding of how the best policies have been implemented, and they also learn from their mistakes. Therefore, it can definitely be said that the conclusions the Member States acquire during those meetings does facilitate mutual learning by the mean of peer review.

This chapter has demonstrated how the OMC works in the field of education. So far, it can generally be concluded that the OMC is effective in this field. The continuous progress reports submitted by the European Commission provides very specific overviews of the progress made in the five educational benchmarks. Moreover, it has clearly been demonstrated and proven that the OMC has encouraged mutual learning through the clusters, the PLA meetings and the peer review. But does mutual learning; the progress reports; the benchmarks, indicators and peer review prove the fact that the OMC *is* effective in the field of education? This question will have to be answered in the final chapter of this thesis and cannot be answered yet as effectiveness is also measured by looking at clear results and actual evidence that effectiveness is taking place. Furthermore, what remains unanswered is whether the OMC does achieve the desired results. In order to demonstrate whether this is true the next chapter will focus on one of the five benchmarks, more specifically early school leaving in the Netherlands. By looking at the measures taken and results of a specific benchmark this will help answer the entire research question posed at the beginning of this paper.

Chapter Five: Early School Leaving in the EU and the Netherlands

In order to make it a little bit easier to try to answer the research question, the aim of this chapter is to analyze one of the five educational benchmarks. At the Lisbon 2010 Summit, the Education and Training was introduced where the European Council decided to lower dropout rates in all Member States. The goal was that by 2010, the early school leaver's (ESL) rate should not be more than 10%. This benchmark was renewed one more time in the Education and Training Programme 2002, which was re-introduced in the Europe 2020 Strategy. Therefore, the benchmark that will be analyzed in this chapter is *the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%.* Unfortunately, due to the limited length of this paper, the analysis of that benchmark will not be done for all EU Member States, but will mostly focus on the Netherlands. This chapter will first begin with by defining earl school leavers.

Early School Leaving in the EU

What is an early school leaver? The EU uses the following definition to define an early school leaver: *"early school leaving refers to those young people who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, and who are no longer in education and training"* (European Commission, 2013, pp.8). Even though this is the general definition the EU uses for defining early school leaving, most Member States define and measure early school leavers differently. Nevertheless, most Member States would say that early school leavers could be:

- People that have left school before the end of compulsory education;
- People who completed some form of compulsory schooling but did not attain the upper secondary level;
- People who have followed pre-vocational or vocational courses, which did not lead to a qualification equivalent to the upper secondary level (Traag, 2012, pp. 14-15).

This description of early school leavers has further been supported by the European Commission who states that "early school leavers can mean leaving education and training systems before the end of compulsory schooling; before reaching a minimum qualification or before completing upper secondary education" (European Commission, 2013, pp.8).

Why do young people decide to leave school? Leaving school is often the result of a long and gradual process of being uninterested and disengaged in school. In its final report on the thematic working group of early school leaving, the European Commission (2013) defines several triggers that push young people to dropout of school. Dropping out is due to problems that can be related to the course of study, the school, or to certain health, personal or emotional difficulties young people face; it can be associated with the socio-economic or family background of pupils; and the limited access to quality education or to an individual's preferred choice of study may be especially problematic in rural or disadvantaged areas (European Commission, 2013, pp. 9).

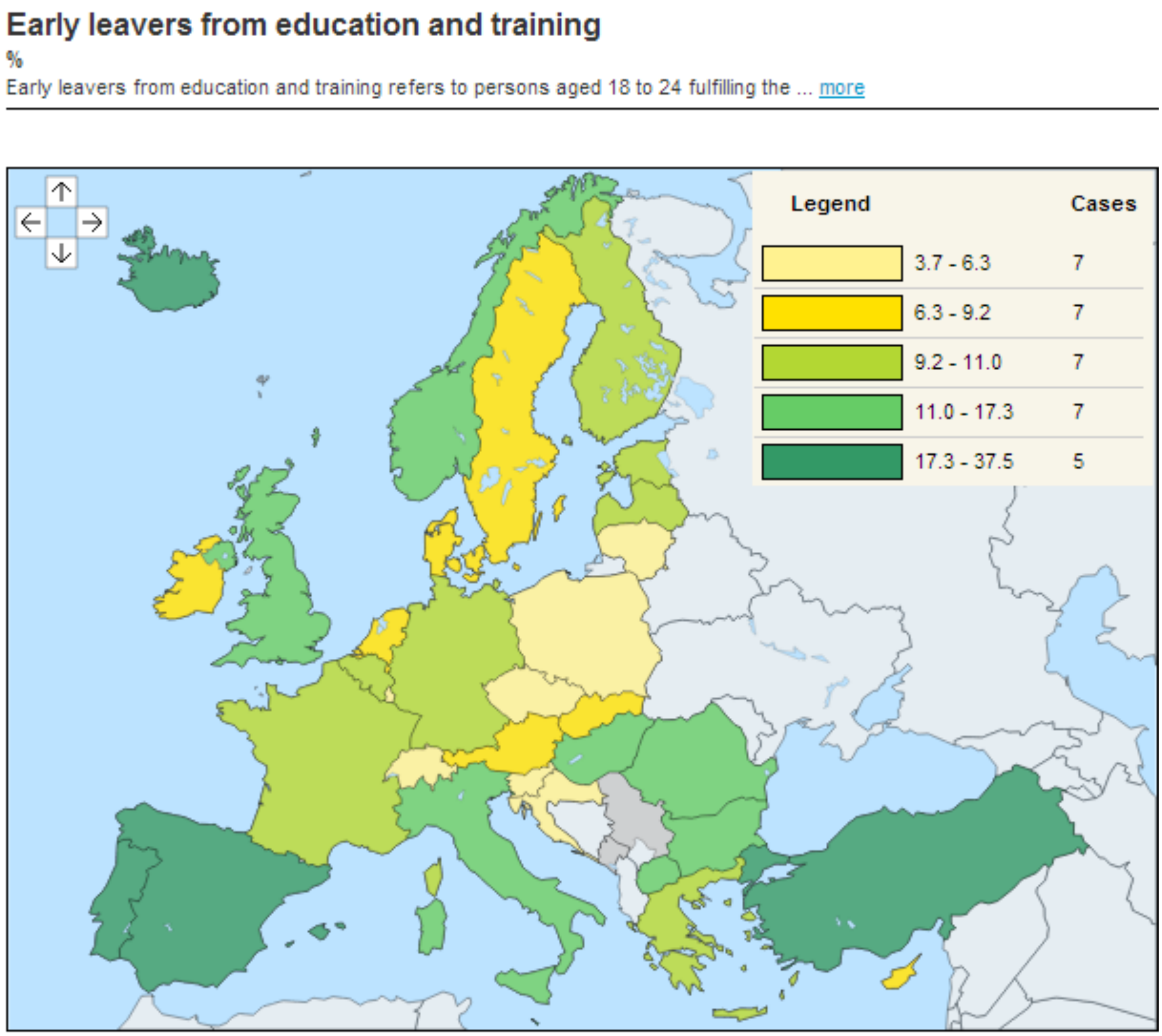


Figure 5.1: Early School Leaving in the EU in 2013[12]

[12] Retrieved July 7, 2014, from the Eurostats Website: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/mapToolClosed.do?tab=map&init=1&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tsdsc410&toolbox=types

The above figure represents the rate of early school leavers in the EU in 2013. It further demonstrates that there are some huge differences in the rate of early school leavers in the EU. Countries like Spain, Portugal, Greece and Italy are well below the 10% target of the Europe 2020 Strategy. Some of the best performing countries are mostly from Eastern Europe, such as Czech Republic, Poland and Lithuania. A lot of the ‘new’ Member States are performing well, while the ‘old’ Member States are struggling to reach the 10% target. These differences are mainly due to the different educational systems each Member States have as well as historical, social and economical (i.e. financial crisis) reasons.

What are the costs for the EU Member States? Becoming an early school leaver or school dropout leads to important consequences for both the young adults and the Member State. Kristof de Witte (2010) and Sofie J. Cabus and Kristof de Witte (2013) argue that the consequences of becoming early school leaver or school dropouts can be measure on three levels. Firstly, it leads to private costs such as higher unemployment risks, lower health status or lower educated children. Secondly, it leads to an increased cost to society by increased risk for criminal activities, lower social cohesion or lower rate of economic growth. Finally, there are also fiscal consequences due to lower tax revenues, higher unemployment allowance or higher health costs (de Witte, 2010, pp. 2 and Cabus & de Witte, 2013, pp. 155-156).

Even though the above figure and the consequences of becoming early school leaver are very alarming, it is important to note that the EU has made a lot of progress since the introduction of the early school leaving target in the Lisbon 2010 Summit. From figure 5.2 below it can be deduced that there is a declining trend in early school leavers in EU countries.

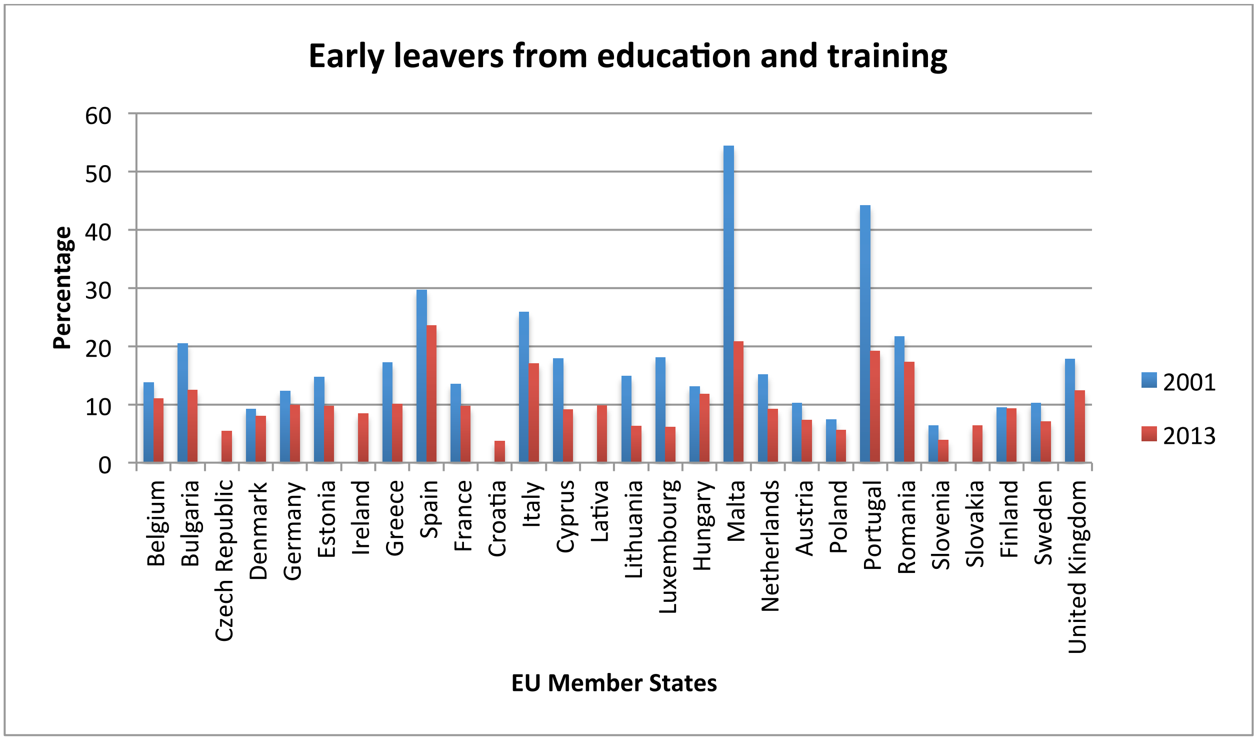


Figure 5.2: Early School Leaving in the EU in 2001 and 2013, comparison[13]

All Member States have developed various programmes in order to reduce the early school leaver's target to the proposed benchmark. The Netherlands has been considered as an exemplary country and has developed very successful measures. What are the successful dropout prevention measures taken by the Netherlands? Are these good results in the declining of early school leavers in the Netherlands due to the implementation of the OMC and the reports of the European Commission?

Early School Leaving in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is one of the most successful EU Member State, and more specifically Western country, when it comes to reducing the rate of early school leavers.

[13] Retrieved July 7, 2014, from the Eurostats Website: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/graph.do?tab=graph&plugin=1&pcode=tsdsc410&language=en&toolbox=sort

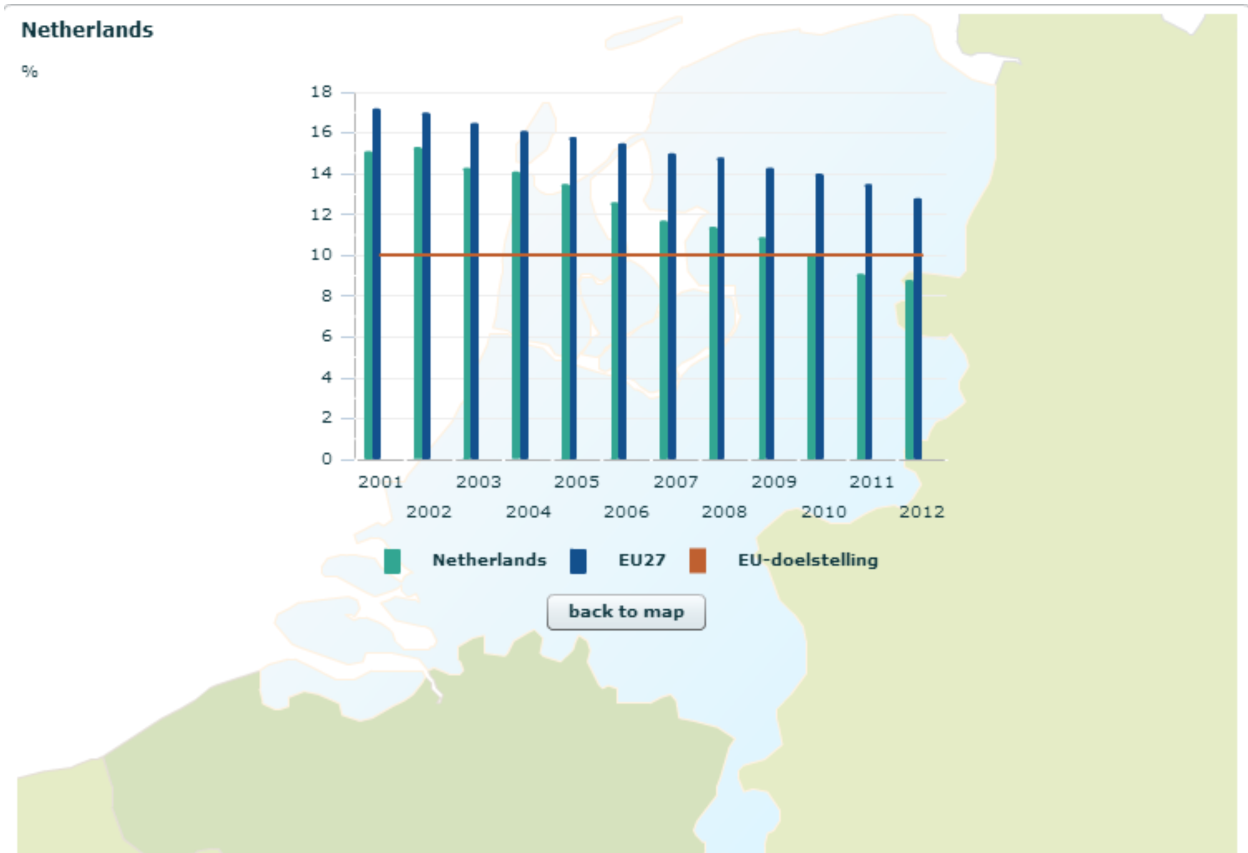


Figure 5.3: Early School Leaving in the Netherlands and EU 27, 2001-2012[14]

Figure 5.3 above shows the overall progress and decline of the percentage rate of early school leavers in the Netherlands and in the EU-27. In 2001, the rate of early school leavers in the Netherlands was 15.1%, and by 2012 this rate was 8.8%, meaning a decline of 6.3%. Furthermore, the Netherlands reached the 10% target by 2010 thereby following the benchmark of the Lisbon 2010 Strategy. From this figure, it can also be concluded that the Netherlands has always had a lower rate than the average rate of EU-27. But what are some of the successful dropout measures the Netherlands implemented over the years to have such a constant decline in early school leavers?

Covenant agreement

Before the 2010 Lisbon Strategy as well as the 2010 Education and Training Programme, the Netherlands did not have any consistent policy towards early school leavers. The Dutch

[14] Retrieved July 7, 2014, from the CBS Website: http://www.cbs.nl/en-GB/menu/themas/onderwijs/cijfers/overig/schoolverlaters.htm

population, its cities and regions are very diverse meaning that different types of policy measures had to be implemented based on those diversities. Therefore, "a task force on early school leaving within the Ministry of Education created 39 regional dropout authorities (RMC). At that time, each of the RMC regions could take (or could not take) different actions towards policy goal settings" (de Witte & Cabus, 2013, pp. 156). In order to facilitate this policy, the Ministry of Education created a 'covenant'. A covenant is a signed agreement between the Ministry of Education and the RMC and the schools. These agreements contain the measures and actions to be taken by the RMC and the school in order to decrease early school leaving. Some of these measures are "to improve the registration of non-attendance and dropout, to improve flexibility of educational participation, to intensify the care for potential dropouts, to increase attention for a good preparation for apprenticeships" (de Witte, 2010, pp. 6) and "to improve truancy registration, to increase flexibility in changing educational tracks and to intensify counseling for students" (de Witte & Cabus, 2013, pp. 156). As a form of compensation, the school receives a subsidy of €2000 per dropout less compared to the previous school year. However, it has been observed that this has not been very effective in reducing early school leaving.

Covenant dropout prevention measures	
Measure	**Implementation**
Reporting truants	Reporting and tackling truancy at a very early stage
Changing subjects	A tailored track for students who choose a wrong subject or who prefer another subject
Guidance towards the students, profession or optimal track	Work placement, writing a letter of application, apprenticeship programs, and creating a portfolio
Apprenticeship	Coordination with local private firms and advanced apprenticeship programs for students who prefer to do manual jobs
Mentoring and coaching	Students are matched with a coach from public or private organizations
Care and advisory team	Coordination of student care by social workers, youth assistance, school attendance officers, health services and police
Smoothing the transition from the pre-vocational level to the vocational level	Intake talks at the vocational school, providing more information on the educational tracks, and checking whether the students effectively enroll at and start in the new vocational

	school
Extended school	Add more sports and culture to schools in order to make school more attractive
Dual track	Offering the possibility for dropout students to re-enter education by a tailored educational track
Frequent intakes	Increasing the number of moments that students may enter secondary education

Table 5.1: Summary of covenant dropout prevention measures[15]

Table 5.1 above represents a summary of some of the dropout prevention measures that the Netherlands has taken since establishing the covenant agreements. De Witte (2010) has distinguished four types of measures that have been implemented by the Dutch government: compulsory education measures, preventative measures, curative measures and national measures. Most of the measures summarized in table 5.1 belong to one of the first three measures identified by de Witte. One of the measures not mentioned in table 5.1 is the complete renewal of the Dutch system of collecting data. This measure has had a lot of impact on reducing early school leavers in the Netherlands. It was the first measure that was taken since the 2010 Lisbon Strategy. However, before looking at the more specific measures related to compulsory education, lets first briefly analyze some of the measures taken in table 5.1.

Reporting truancy

School absenteeism is considered as the first cause of early school leavers. It is often related to those young people that are associated with "juvenile crime, teenage pregnancy, drugs or alcohol abuse and eventually may lead to school dropout" (de Witte & Cabus, 2013, pp. 160). In order to fight against school absenteeism, the Netherlands established a digital office of non-attendance, which helps to tracks down those students not attending school. One of the main features of this digital office is to "discourage risk-averse pupils" (de Witte, 2010, pp. 7). Through this digital office, parents may receive a paper stating that their child has skipped school. This can therefore lead students to actual go to school instead of taking the risk at getting caught at not attending

[15] Retrieved May 20, 2014, from the Webmeets Website: http://www.webmeets.com/files/papers/EARIE/2010/242/Earie%20-%20De%20Witte%20Kristof.pdf

school. However, there remains very little evidence that this actually leads to reducing early school leavers.

Extended school

Students committed and motivation to actually going to school is by motivating theme through extra curricular activities. “One particular policy measure aimed at extending school time is by offering a range of additional services and activities to students” (de Witte & Cabus, 2013, pp. 161). This has been done in the Netherlands by offering sport and leisure activities in schools. This form of policy helps students staying longer in schools and provides teachers the opportunity to follow them more. It also gives the student a more attractive study programme when such activities are proposed.

Dual tracks

Dual track is part of the curative measures mentioned above. Curative measures deal most with students who already have a job but do not have any starter’s qualifications. The aim of the Dutch government is to help those students to have their starter’s qualifications through the use of dual tracks. This refers to the combination of working and studying at the same. The Dutch government has already taken several measures in this field, for example temporary arrangement (‘plusvoorzieningen’) and vocational training (‘beroepsorientere praktijkvorming’). Vocational training deals mostly with, for example, ‘part-time learning about construction techniques and part-time working in constructions’ (de Witte & Cabus, 2013, pp.160).

Compulsory education

One of the first and obvious measures that were taken way before the 2010 Lisbon Strategy was compulsory schooling. Compulsory schooling is one effective way that helps to reduce early school leavers in any country. In the Netherlands, compulsory schooling was introduced in 1969 and starts at the age of 5 and lasts until the age of 16. In 2007, some changes were made where “Dutch youth are obliged to learn or to work until the age of 18 or until completion of ISCED 3 (‘kwalificatieplicht’)” (Traag, 2012, pp. 16). As of 2009, those who have not managed to receive this minimum educational level by the age of 18 are either required to start learning again or to work until the age of 27. If this is not met, there can be harsh consequences, for example social benefits or assistance may be denied.

The second measure taken in compulsory education was the complete renewal of the entire Dutch system for collecting data on early school leavers and helping monitor early school leavers. The previous system that was used was inaccurate, unreliable and had a lack of transparency (de Witte, 2010, pp. 6). The new registration data was introduced in 2006 known as the fighting for dropout programme ('aanval op de uitval'), where a completely new student data system was introduced. "The data system made it possible to generate ESL figures at national and regional level for each municipality and district" (European Commission, 2012, pp.4). How does this programme work? Every student that is registered in the Dutch educational system receives a personal identification number, or an education number. The number remains with the student throughout their education career, even when they change schools, or regions. All the schools and universities throughout the Netherlands can gather those education numbers and join personal data. In the end, all of the registrations end up in one nationwide database known as 'het Basisregister Onderwijs', or BRON. It is through this nationwide system that the government can keep track of early school leavers. "Those young people who are registered in the BRON system as being of compulsory school age but not attending education or training and not holding a basic qualification are classified as early school leavers" (European Commission, 2012, pp.4).

One question that can be asked is how does this system reduce early school leavers? Firstly, because this data is available for all schools it can create some competition between schools to reduce early school leavers. It will boost school to put more effort in lowering early school leavers in their school. Secondly, reports are published each year[16]:

- *"ESL figures and rates are published twice a year in a report*
- *Each region is provided with a factsheet on ESL in their region*
- *Every secondary vocational school is provided with a factsheet on ESL in their school*
- *Details ESL tables are prepared for regions and schools/training institutions*
- *A monthly report is drafted for municipalities and schools/training institutions, which are kept as confidential documents"* (European Commission, 2012, pp.4-5).

[16] For a detailed view (in Dutch) of these reports go to: http://www.aanvalopschooluitval.nl/cijfers/vsv-cijferproducten/vsv-atlas

The first four points mentioned above are publically available, meaning that any school can read the reports of other schools, regions or municipalities. These reports provide a comparison of all schools by looking at the progress each one has made in reducing early school leavers. Here again this will lead schools, municipalities and regions to compete against one another in order to become the 'best' in reducing early school leavers. In addition to this, the peer learning activity group for reducing early school leaving in the Netherlands provides some important facts and lessons that Member States can use to have a successful ESL policy:

- *"Any national ESL strategy should be based on full understanding of the scale and scope of the problem of ESL. This requires an establishment of a system that allow regular, accurate monitoring of ESL in the country*
- *Peer pressure created by reliable, comparative ESL data can stimulate school improvement and lead to reduced ESL*
- *Better data can help foster a culture of openness and transparency at all levels*
- *Be as transparent with data as possible but as private as possible with personal information*
- *Quality assurance provisions need to be in place to protect the accuracy and reliability of data*
- *Data from truancy/absenteeism portals can be used to forecast ESL rates for the upcoming years"* (European Commission, 2012, pp. 11-12).

It is important to point out that this strategy developed by the Dutch government was not realized over night. Talks of this strategy started in 2001, but were only implemented in the 2005-2006 academic year and more changes were made in the following academic year. This is definitely a long process, but with positive results in the end.

Early school leavers in vocational education and training

After looking at some of the successful measures in the covenant agreement, and a thorough analysis of compulsory education, the Netherlands has also formulated a number of measures to reduce early school leavers in vocational education and training (VET). This is the most challenging branch for the Netherlands as it has the highest percentage rate of early school leavers compared to secondary schools. In the academic year 2010-2011, the early school-leaving rate for VET was 7.2%, while the academic orientated secondary school rates was 1%

(Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2012, pp. 10). In the academic year 2012-2013 those numbers decreased to 5.7% for VET, and 0.6% for secondary education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2014, pp. 10).

According to the peer learning activity for early school leavers, some of the key challenges the Netherlands had to face in VET schools have been: "insufficient care/support provisions, poor permeability between study paths but especially between VET and higher education, high dropout rates during transition from one level of VET to another, different schools providing pre-VET and VET courses and early tracking (the choice of vocational vs. academic pathway)" (European Commission, 2012, pp. 10). After identifying these key challenges the Netherlands undertook numerous measures to reduce early school leavers in VET:

- *"Young people are supported during their move from relatively small and familiar pre-vocational secondary schools to much larger upper secondary schools. This had a positive impact on ESL rates in many vocational schools across the country*
- *More outreach work: youth workers have been employed to visit young people who are not attending school. They try to encourage them to return to education*
- *Improved career guidance provision throughout the student life so as to prevent students from making wrong course choices*
- *Encouraging students to choose courses with better further study and employment opportunities*
- *Improving the quality of VET by place an ever-greater focus on high quality craftsmanship skills*
- *Providing additional care and support during the first year at a VET school, due to high ESL rates*
- *Reducing the overall duration of VET courses but increasing the amount of teaching time during the remaining academic years. This involves cutting down some VET courses from four to three years and others from three to two years*
- *Seeking a more accurate match between regional labour market demands and available VET training courses*
- *Improvement of school management systems and practices"* (European Commission, 2012, pp. 10)

As previously noted, the rate of early school leavers in VET is still very high in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, due to the implementation of the measures stated above, the Netherlands has already managed to reduce that rate in that particular field. The Dutch government still believes that greater progress needs to be made in this field.

Results of early school leaving policies

Since the start of the 2010 Education and Training Programme, the volume of early school leavers in the Netherlands has decreased quite rapidly. In 2001, there were 273 000 early school leavers. This number went down to 162 000 in 2010 (see figure 5.4 below) (Traag, 2012, pp. 11). "On the total population of 18 to 24 year olds, this reflects a decrease of 15.1% early school leavers in 2001 to 10.1% in 2010" (Traag, 2012, pp. 11).

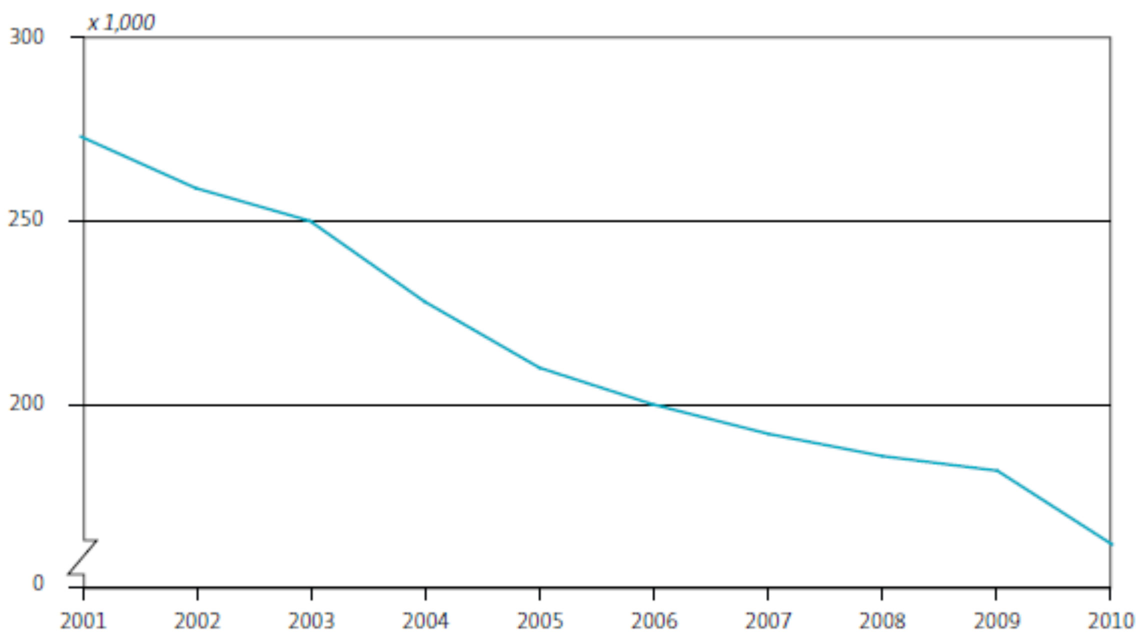


Figure 5.4: Volume of early school leavers in the Netherlands, 15 to 24 year olds[17]

Figure 5.5 below also shows the overall progress of early school leavers, in terms of percentages, in the Netherlands. What can be concluded from this figure is that at the beginning of the 2010 Education and Training Programme, progress was rather slow and there was even a small

[17] Retrieved May 20, 2014, from the CBS Website: http://www.cbs.nl/NR/rdonlyres/CAFDC1FC-E23B-49C8-9833-2AE9E639E4E3/0/2012X11Traagpub.pdf

increase in 2002 compared to 2001. A slow progress does not come as a surprise. All the measures taken by the Dutch government take time to implement. For example, changing the whole registration system took time and results were only seen in the academic year 2005-2006, that is four years after the Lisbon Summit. Even though the progress was slow, it has always been constant. In 2000, the percentage of early school leavers was 15.4% and by 2013 this was 9.2%. Furthermore, by 2010 the Netherlands did reach the 10% target set out in both the 2010 and 2020 educational programme. However, what the Netherlands now needs to do is continue to decrease this rate and not stagnate.

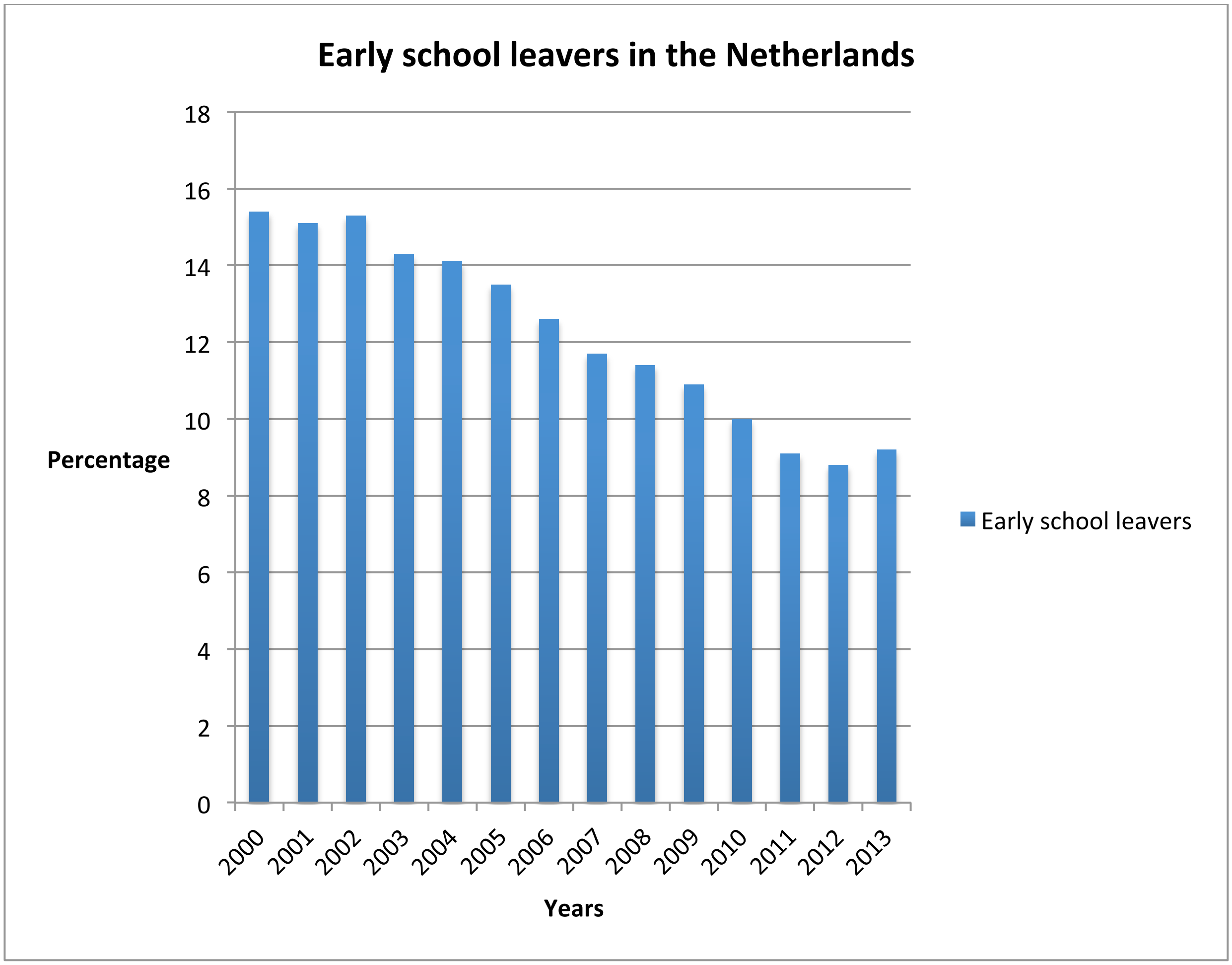


Figure 5.5: Early school leavers in the Netherlands over a 13 year period[18]

[18] Retrieved July 10, 2014, from the Eurostats Website: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tsdsc410&plugin=1

The Netherlands also has it's own national goal and would like the early school leaving rate to be below 8% by 2020. Furthermore, when it comes to *new* early school leavers, the Netherlands has also established national targets (in numbers). By 2012, the Dutch government's objective was to reduce the number of new early school leavers to 35 000 (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2014, pp. 6). The Dutch government does not aim to stop there. By 2016, it hopes to have a maximum of 25 000 new early school leavers. This is extremely ambitious, especially with the small raise of 'normal' early school leavers in 2013, in comparison to 2012 (see figure 5.5 above). In order to achieve this, the government aims to continue pursuing their current policies; "systematic improvements in education, support from the youth care, public safety and employment sectors, closer monitoring and stricter enforcement" (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2014, pp. 6) and will probably also need to accelerate its pace if it wishes to attain the 2016 objective for new early school leavers.

This whole section of chapter five has tried to demonstrate that in the Netherlands the use of the OMC has been working. The Dutch government has worked together with schools, municipalities and regions to pull together a set of agreements in order to reduce early school leaving. It is then up to the schools to choose what kind of measures they want to apply to reduce early school leaving. Then, yearly reports are published in order to determine which schools have progressed and which have not. This is very similar to peer pressure that is used within the OMC between the Member States. In the Netherlands, the schools, municipalities and regions are actually ranked from best to worst. This ranking should boost the worst performing schools to do better in the next years. However, what needs to be taken from the measures proposed in this section is that it takes a lot of time before actual results are seen. It took approximately four years to renew the registration system of students. These reforms and the actual results will not be seen over night.

Furthermore, it can be concluded from this section that the reduction of early school leavers and these good results in the Netherlands are not only due to the OMC and the European Commission, but also the amount of cooperation and effort put by the Dutch government, the schools, municipalities and regions. Credits can definitely also be rewarded to the OMC, the European Commission, the 2010 and 2020 Educational Programmes, the 2010 Lisbon Strategy and the Europe 2020 Strategy, as without those ideas of trying to reduce early school leavers, as well as the other four benchmarks in education, there is a high chance that the Netherlands would not have taken as many measures and as much action to reduce this rate. Therefore, this is definitely a great amount of work that has been done by various EU institutions and members of the Dutch government, as well as third parties.

What now remains to be answered is whether there has been a general decrease of early school leavers throughout the EU since the implementation of the OMC, and whether the Member States will be able to achieve the five educational benchmarks by 2020.

Implementing the OMC

Figure 5.5 below, also previously seen on page 39, shows a general comparison of early school leavers in education in 2001 and 2013 for all EU Member States. The main trend reflected here is that in all Member States there has been a general decline of early school leavers since the implementation of the OMC in 2001. In 2001, 17 Member State had more than 10% of early school leavers. Twelve years later, this number decreased to 9 Member States.

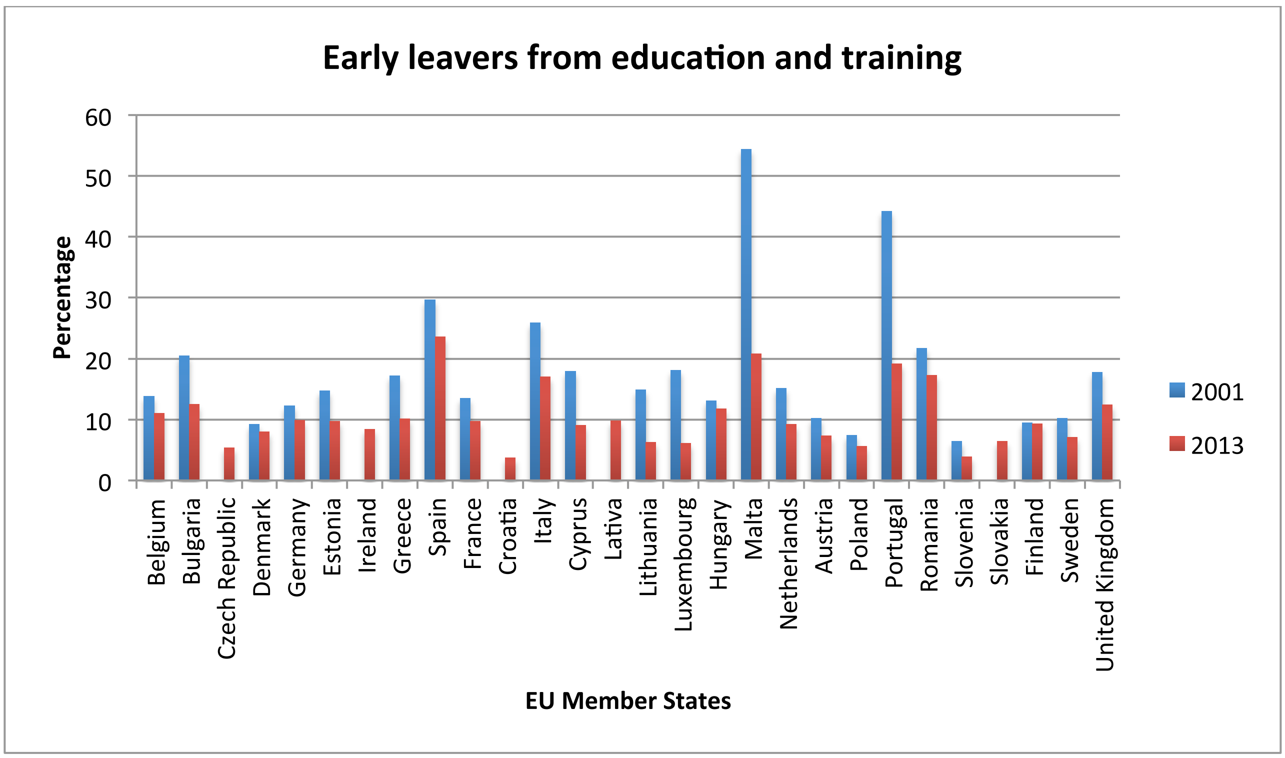


Figure 5.5: Early School Leaving in the EU in 2001 and 2013, comparison[19]

[19] Retrieved July 7, 2014, from the Eurostats Website: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/graph.do?tab=graph&plugin=1&pcode=tsdsc410&language=en&toolbox=sort

The most important decline has been in Malta and Portugal. In 2001, the percentage of early school leavers in Malta was 54.4% and 44.2% in Portugal. These percentages have decreased drastically over the twelve-year period to 20.8% for Malta and 19.2% for Portugal in 2013. For both countries, this reflects more than a 50% decrease. However, even though major progress has been made in those two countries, a lot of effort still needs to be done in order to reach the 10% target. This observation is not only valuable for Malta and Portugal, but also for Spain, Italy and Romania whom are all lacking behind.

Even though the Member States have made some great progress in early school leavers, and for most the target of 10% will be achieved by 2020, can all of the Member States achieve all of the educational benchmarks? Just as a small reminder, the five educational benchmarks agreed upon in the 2020 Europe and Training Programme is as follows:

- At least 95% of children between the age of four and the age of starting compulsory primary school should participate in early childhood education
- The share of 15 year-olds with insufficient abilities in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%
- The share of early school leavers from education and training should be less than 10%
- The share of 30-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%
- An average of at least 15% of adults (age group 25-64) should participate in lifelong learning

As can be observed from the EU maps of Appendix C, the general feeling is that major measures need to be taken in all of the benchmarks. In all of the benchmarks, it can be seen that quite a few Member States are marked in yellow, orange and red. This is especially alarming in low achievements in mathematics, science and reading where most Member States are far from reaching the benchmark mentioned above. There are also very few Member States whose average of at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning. A lot of the Eastern European and Southern Member States are again far from the target in lifelong learning. However, it is important to point out that these graphs are from 2012, two years after the implementation of the new educational programme. At the time of the publication of these graphs, the Member States still had eight years to implement the necessary measures and policies to reach these targets.

At this point in time, it is very difficult to say whether or not *all* of the Member States will be able to reach all of the benchmarks set out in the 2020 Education and Training Programme. At this point, Member States that are in orange and red need to make much more effort and rapidly find suitable measures and policies in order to reach the targets. It is also very difficult to compare most of these benchmarks with results from the 2010 educational programme since some of those are completely new (i.e. early childhood care, low achievements in mathematics, science and reading, and tertiary education attainment) or has changed slightly (i.e. the percentage of lifelong learning has increased from 12.5% to 15%). If a comparison were to be made, this would only be possible for early school leavers. As was previously noted throughout this chapter, the Member States have made a lot of progress in this benchmark, and out of the then 27 Member States, 18 of them reached the 2010 target. Moreover, in 2012 only 9 countries were over the 10% target meaning that enormous efforts had been made during the Lisbon Strategy. Nevertheless, with this short comparison of only one benchmark, it is very difficult to determine whether or not all of the Member States will achieve them by 2020.

So is the OMC effective and does it achieve the desired results?

The Open Method of Coordination

In order to answer whether the OMC is effective or not, the word *effective* must firstly be defined. The core definition of effective is: *"the extent to which an activity fulfills its intended purpose or function"*[20]. In education, effectiveness is *"an output of specific review/analyses that measure the achievement of a specific educational goal or the degree to which a higher education institution can be expected to achieve specific requirements. As a primary measure of success of a programme or of a higher education institution, clear indicators, meaningful information, and evidence best reflecting institutional effectiveness with respect to student learning and academic achievement have to be gathered through various procedures"*[21]. Looking at the definition mentioned above, it could be assumed and concluded that the OMC is effective. As was reflected in chapter four and five, the OMC has clear benchmarks and indicators; Member States are involved in peer learning activities and peer pressure where information is exchanged about the successful and unsuccessful measures and policies

[20] http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/effectiveness.htm
[21] http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/effectiveness.htm

implemented in their country in the field of education; and numerous reports are published by the European Commission and the European Council on a yearly basis in order to see the overall progress of each Member State. The OMC also measures the achievements of the Member States in all five educational benchmarks. However, there seem to be a major problem; the results are simply not reflecting the effectiveness of the method. With the PLA meetings, the exchange of information between the Member States, the peer pressure applied on one another in order to have the best measures and policies to reach those targets and with the European Commission's yearly recommendations on what the Member States could do, the Member States should have achieved the targets agreed upon in the 2010 Education and Training Programme. This means that positive results should have been seen. However, by the end of 2010 this was not the case, and as will be discussed below having an effective method does not necessarily mean that the desired result will be obtained and achieved.

In order to answer the question whether the OMC was able to achieve the desired results in 2010, the answer needs to be split into two by first looking at the 2010 Education and Training Programme and then looking at the 2020 Education and Training Programme. The overall results of the 2010 educational programme weren't very successful and it can even be said that the OMC did not achieve the desired results. This has clearly been reflected in figure 4.2 on page 27 and figure 4.2 on page 28. What can be concluded from both figures is that the average rate all of the benchmarks, except for the mathematics, science and technology benchmark, did not meet their target by 2010. There are a few reasons to why this failed. Firstly, when implementing new measures and new policies, the actual process of implementing those takes a long time. Especially when it comes to benchmarks like the one proposed in the 2010 educational programme, it takes months of preparation, and analysis before something can actually get done. This is also valid for results. When a country is implementing a new policy, actual results will only be seen in a few years. Secondly, when these five benchmarks were established, there were only 15 Member States in the EU. Having ten new Member States join the EU half way through the programme meant they these Member States had to take into consideration the five benchmarks in their respective educational programmes. PLA meetings became much bigger over night, and the general average of all of the benchmarks were weakened. Finally, this was the first time that the EU decided to establish such a programme. It had never been done before and required some time of adaptation for all Member States. Therefore, if we look at the overall results of the 2010 educational programme it can be said that the OMC did not achieve the desired results.

When it comes to the 2020 Education and Training Programme it is very difficult to provide a concrete answer on whether the OMC has achieved the desired results. This renewed programme has now been established for three years and there are still very little results available from the Member States, and even from the European Commission and the Council. Nevertheless, what can be said is that if the Member States would want to achieve the targets set down in the five educational benchmarks, a lot of work still needs to be done. The peer learning activity meetings have certainly helped to see which policies work best for what country. However, this is certainly not enough. This is clearly seen on the maps in Appendix C. As previously noted, in all five benchmarks there are always numerous (between five and fifteen Member States) Member States that are either in orange or red, meaning that they are still very far away from reaching the target. There is not one benchmark that is fully light green or dark green, meaning that the target of the benchmark is almost reached or has been reached. Furthermore, there is not one Member States that is doing very well in the five benchmarks. The European Commission has pointed out that in all benchmarks there are always different best performers and worst performers.

Even though all of the observations mentioned above are very negative, it has been pointed out in this chapter that the Netherlands has been performing well, especially in reducing the rate of early school leavers. The Netherlands has managed to make use of the OMC in a very positive way. The Dutch government, and third parties like schools; municipalities and regions are the reasons why the OMC has worked in reducing early school leavers in the Netherlands. Due to the success of one country, it is therefore very difficult to generalize and say that the OMC has not achieved the desired results because in the Netherlands it has. In order to have a more valid and concrete answer to this research question, a country-by-country analysis would need to be performed in order to know whether the OMC can achieve the results it hopes too. However, this would need a tremendous amount of work and would probably take years before obtaining a complete answer.

Conclusion

This aim of this paper was to try to answer two questions. The first question was whether or not the OMC is an effective method in the field of education. Chapters four and five have demonstrated that

1) The OMC makes use of clear benchmarks and indicators so that the Member States know what to focus on;
2) The Member States are also involved in peer learning activities where they exchange information about the successful and unsuccessful measures and policies implemented in their country in the field of education;
3) The Member States also apply peer pressure so that those Member States that are successful do not stagnate in the several benchmarks and keep on working towards even better goals;
4) The European Commission and the European Council publish numerous reports and progress reports on a yearly basis so that the Member States have a clear idea towards where they are heading. These reports also measure the achievements of all of the Member States and provide clear recommendations on where improvement is needed and how this can be done.

The OMC has all of the assets of being an effective method. This was clearly demonstrated in chapter five, with a country analysis of the Netherlands in the early school leaver's benchmark. What has been concluded from this chapter is that over a twelve-year period, through the use of the OMC, the Netherlands has managed to reduce its early school leaver's rate. The Dutch government did not work on this alone, and had great commitments and efforts from all of the schools, municipalities and regions. Together, all of these 'institutions' were able to reach the 10% target of early school leavers in the Netherlands in 2010. Even though this target is still the same for 2020, the Netherlands is now focusing on its national target, which is to reduce early school leavers by 8%. What was also noted from using the OMC is that it takes a very long time to implement the correct measures and policies. It also took several years before actual results were noticed. Nevertheless, the OMC has worked for the Netherlands in this particular field. However, when looking at the overall results of the 2010 benchmarks and at the progress made towards the 2020 benchmarks, there is room for improvement. Besides those improvements there are some major concerns too. The results of the 2010 benchmarks simply do not reflect the effectiveness of the OMC. With the PLA meetings, the exchange of information between the Member States, the peer pressure applied on one another in order to have the best measures and policies to reach those targets and with the European Commission's yearly recommendations on what the Member States could do, the Member States should have achieved the benchmarks agreed upon. Positive results should have been seen in all Member States. However, by the end of 2010 this was not the case, and as will be concluded below having an effective method does not necessarily mean that the desired result will be obtained and achieved.

The second question of the research question was whether the OMC was and is able to achieve the desired results. The desired results are achieving the five educational benchmarks. As was noted throughout this paper, the 2010 benchmarks had not been reached by all of the Member States. There was not one benchmark that was completely achieved. Two main reasons were pointed out to why this failed. Firstly, as explained earlier in this conclusion, it takes time to implement the correct measures and policies. It then takes even more time to actually see positive results. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that half way through the 2010 benchmarks, very little results were seen in most Member States. There were results but those were slow. And secondly, half way through the first round of benchmarks, ten new Member States entered the EU and they had to take into consideration the five benchmarks in their respective educational programmes. Major effort was also expected from them, but here again it took a lot of time for them to find the correct measures in order to meet all of the targets. Here again the average of all of the benchmarks went down. Therefore, the OMC did not reach its desired results for the 2010 benchmarks.

It is even more difficult to make such an analysis for the 2020 benchmarks; some benchmarks are completely new, others have some slight changes and only the early school leaver's benchmark remains unchanged. However, what can be concluded is that Member States will have to put much more effort is they would like to reach the 2020 benchmarks. The European Commission reported this. Progress is very slow. Some countries are stagnating, and need to be pushed to go further.

Even though the answer to the research question is more negative than positive, there are some encouraging observations. It has been pointed out that the Netherlands has been performing well, especially in reducing the rate of early school leavers. The Netherlands has therefore managed to make use of the OMC in a very positive manner. The Dutch government, and third parties like schools; municipalities and regions are the reasons why the OMC has worked in reducing early school leavers in the Netherlands. However, all of this only reflects a partial success of one country, and it is therefore very difficult to generalize and say that the OMC has not achieved the desired results because in the Netherlands it has.

Therefore, to conclude, in order to have a more valid and concrete answer to both parts of the research question, country-by-country analysis would need to be performed in order to know whether the OMC can achieve the results it hopes too and if it is an effective method. This would need a tremendous amount of work and would probably take years before obtaining a complete answer.

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Appendix A – Taxation and Customs Union

Enhanced administrative cooperation in the field of (direct) taxation

On 6th December 2012 the European Commission adopted a regulation laying down detailed rules for implementing Council Directive 2011/16/EU (Commission Implementing Regulation 1156/2012). It includes various provisions on the standards forms and means of communication that Member States will use when exchanging information.

The national laws, regulations and administrative provisions implementing the Directive entered into force on 1st January 2013, with the exception of the provisions relating to automatic exchange information which will enter into force on 1st January 2015.

On 12th June, 2013 the Commission proposed extending the automatic exchange of information between EU tax administrations, as part of the intensified fight against tax evasion. See the press release (IP/13/530), the frequently asked questions (MEMO/13/533) and the proposal (COM/2013/348(70 kB)), and Commissioner Šemeta's speech.

Council Directive 2011/16/EU is based on a proposal presented by, the European Commission on 2 February 2009 to replace Council Directive 77/799/EEC concerning mutual assistance by the competent authorities of Member States in the field of direct taxation and taxation of insurance premiums (COM(2009)29 final and the press release IP/09/201).

The ECOFIN Council of 15th February 2011 formally adopted the new Council Directive 2011/16/EU on administrative cooperation in the field of taxation and repealing Directive 77/799/EEC. The Directive was published in the Official Journal on 11 March 2011 (Council Directive 2011/16/EU and the press release).

Reasons for the 2011 Directive

Because taxation is not harmonised across the EU, enhanced administrative cooperation is the only way of ensuring taxes are correctly assessed and of combating tax fraud and tax evasion.

The previous Directive on mutual assistance – 77/799/EEC – was designed in a different context to current internal-market requirements. Even after amendment, it would never have been sufficient to enable Member States to cooperate effectively on taxation.

To maintain full national sovereignty over the types and level of taxes, the EU needed reinforced instruments that establish a basis for administrative cooperation between the Member States in line with new requirements in a globalised era and create trust by laying down the same rules, obligations and rights for all.

For these reasons, Directive 77/799/EEC was repealed and a new Directive introduced.

Main provisions for the 2011 Directive

- The Directive ensures that the EU standards for transparency and exchange of information on request are aligned to international standards. In particular, it provides that Member States can no longer refuse to supply information solely because this information is held by a bank or other type of financial institution.
- The Directive provides for the exchange of information that is of `foreseeable relevance` to the administration and the enforcement of Member States' tax laws.
- The scope of the Directive is extended to all taxes of any kind with the exception of VAT, customs duties, excise duties and compulsory social contributions already covered by other Union legislation on administrative cooperation.
- The exchanges can relate to natural and legal persons, to associations of persons and any other legal arrangement.
- The Directive introduces automatic exchange of information from 1 January 2015 on five categories of income and capital based on available information (income from employment, director's fees, life insurance products not covered by other Directives, pensions, ownership of and income from immovable property). Following a Commission report to be submitted before 1 July 2017 and on the basis of a new proposal by the Commission, this list might be extended to dividends, capital gains and royalties. In addition, the Council may also decide to introduce unconditional automatic exchange of information in respect of at least three of the five aforementioned categories.
- The Directive also ensures that the existing mechanisms for exchange of information are improved. Deadlines are introduced to accelerate procedures both for the exchange of information on request (reply within six months following receipt of request) and for

spontaneous exchange of information (transmission of information no later than one month after it becomes available).

- The Directive introduces a mechanism to encourage feedback by the Member States that have received the information. Such feedback should be given, at the latest, three months after the outcome of the use of the information is known.
- The Directive provides for other means of administrative cooperation including being present in the offices where the administrative authorities of the requested Member State carry out their duties, being present in administrative enquiries of the requested Member State, simultaneous controls, requests for notification and sharing of best practices.
- The Directive provides for the introduction of standard forms for exchange of information on request and spontaneous exchanges, computerised formats for the automatic exchange of information and channels for exchanging information.
- The Directive contains a most favoured nation clause: if a Member State provides wider cooperation to a third country than that provided for under the directive it may not refuse such wider cooperation to another Member State that requests it on its own behalf.
- The Directive establishes a regulatory committee, which will be competent for implementing the technical aspects of the directive.

Appendix B – Lisbon Strategy

What is it for?

The Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs was launched in 2000 as a response to globalisation. The idea is for the EU and its member countries to cooperate on reforms aimed at generating growth and more and better jobs by investing in people's skills, the greening of the economy and innovation.

Key areas

The strategy gives pointers for some key reforms in EU countries:

- **Investing in people** – to adjust to globalisation, the EU's fast-changing economy requires a flexible and highly skilled workforce. Lifelong learning projects help people to adapt to a changing job market.
- **More research, development and innovation** – strengthening links between research institutes, universities and businesses. At the same time, spending on research and development in the EU should increase to match international competitors.
- **A more dynamic business environment** – less red tape and easier access to credit, especially for small and medium-sized businesses.
- **A greener economy** – leading the fight against climate change, the EU aims to reduce the environmental impact of economic growth by saving energy and promoting new, environment-friendly technologies.

Recovering from the economic downturn

Just when the growth and jobs strategy was starting to deliver with steadily declining unemployment rates throughout the EU, the economic and financial crisis reversed the situation, highlighting the need to pursue and accelerate structural reforms.

The short-term measures taken by the EU and its member countries will bring maximum benefits if they are in line with the strategy's medium- and long-term objectives.

How does it work?

The main challenge is to lead the EU out of the recession through reforms to make the economy greener and more innovative - while encouraging lifelong learning. Economically our countries are so interdependent that, to make a real difference, they need to work together in the framework of the EU.

Why do we need economic reforms?

To stay competitive with traditional trading partners like the US and Japan, and with emerging economies like China and India, the EU needs to be more innovative. Ultimately, economic reforms are about ensuring the sustainability of European welfare systems in the future.

Who does what?

As a “partnership for growth and jobs” between the EU and its member countries, the Lisbon strategy sets out the general thrust for reforms and sets the objectives and priorities for action.

Individual governments then set up national reform programmes that take account of their specific situation. Reforms cover areas such as public finance, education, research and development, the business environment and labour markets. The EU monitors each country’s progress and makes further recommendations if necessary.

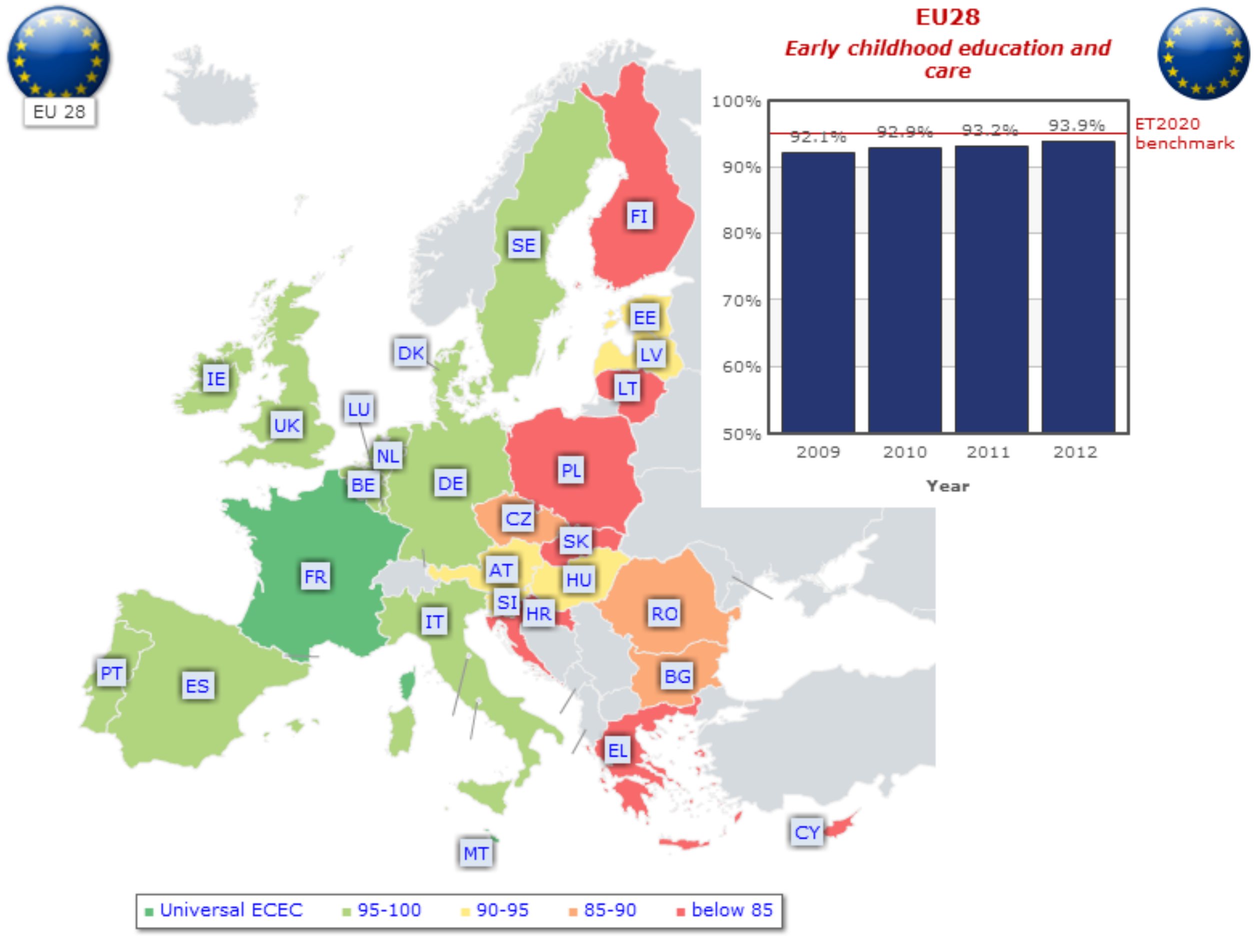
EU countries receive €350 bn from the EU structural funds to help them implement these reforms. A further €50 bn is channelled into research and development projects.

Economic recovery

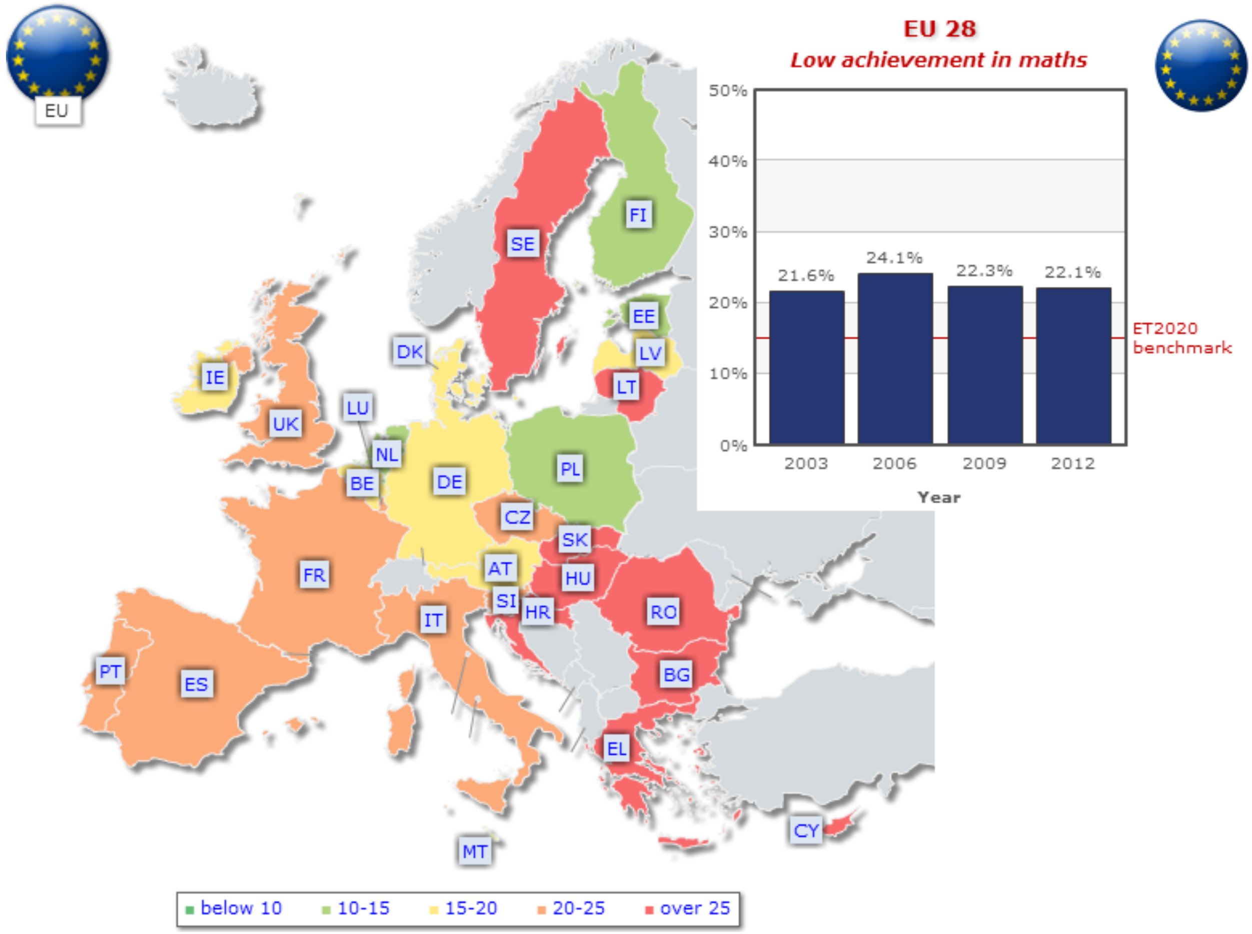
In 2008, the EU adopted a plan to stimulate recovery from the economic and financial crisis. The plan injected €200 bn into the economy – €170 bn from national budgets and €30bn from EU funds and the European Investment Bank. The aim is to stimulate demand and boost confidence in the short term while at the same time making the EU economy greener and more innovative by funding investments in skills, infrastructure, and environment-friendly technologies.

Appendix C – Europe 2020 Strategy

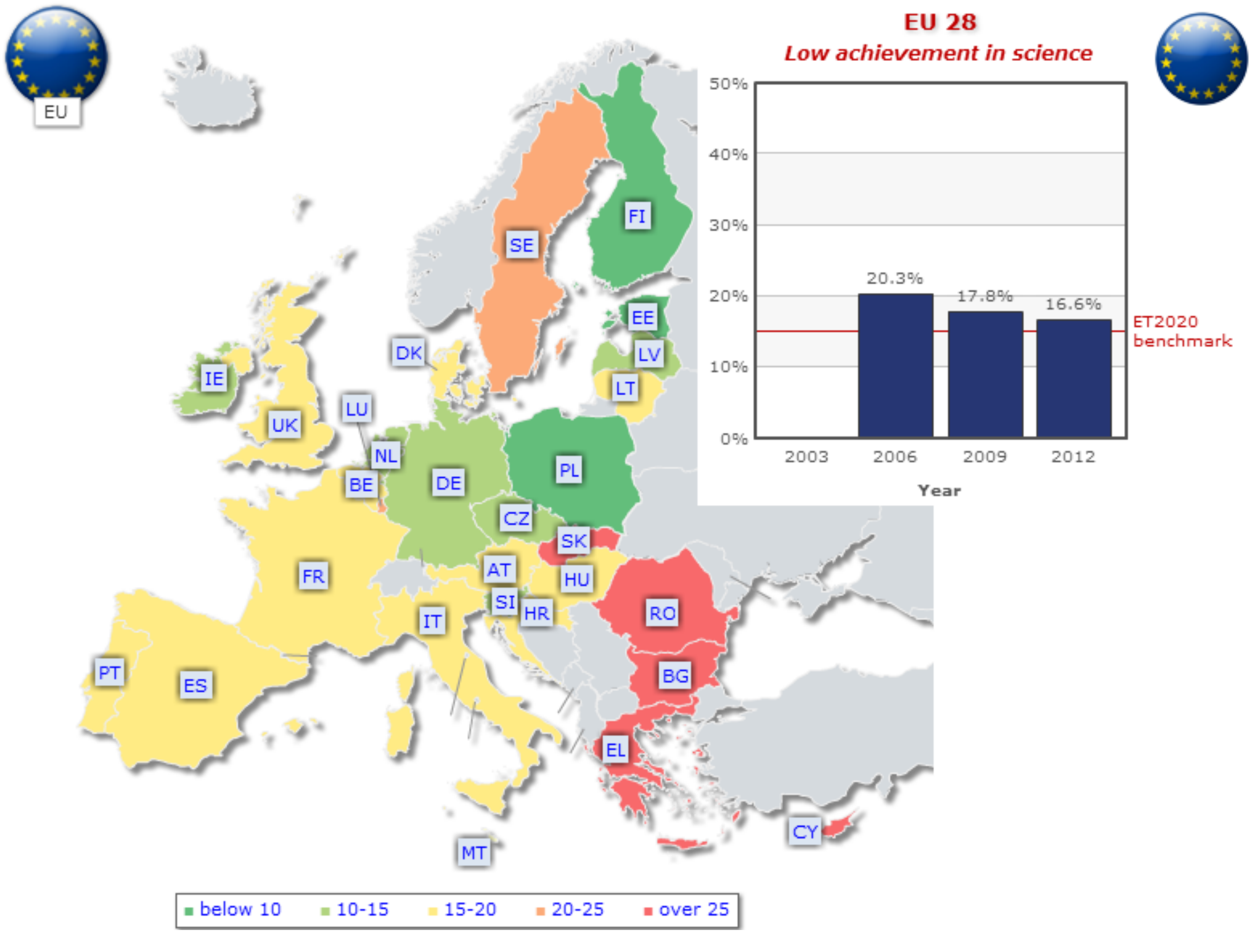
Early Childhood Education and Care



Low Achievements in Mathematics



Low Achievements in Science



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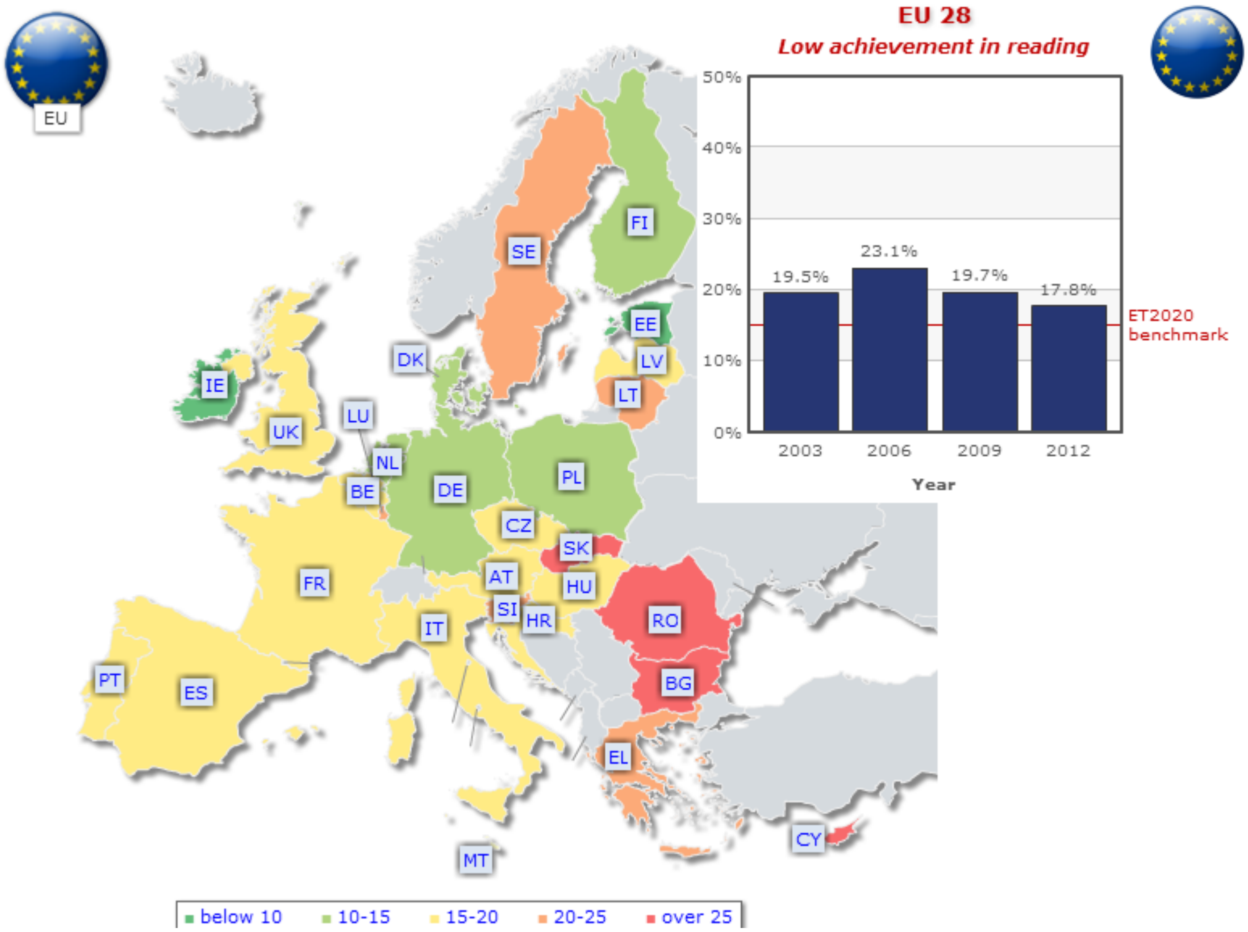
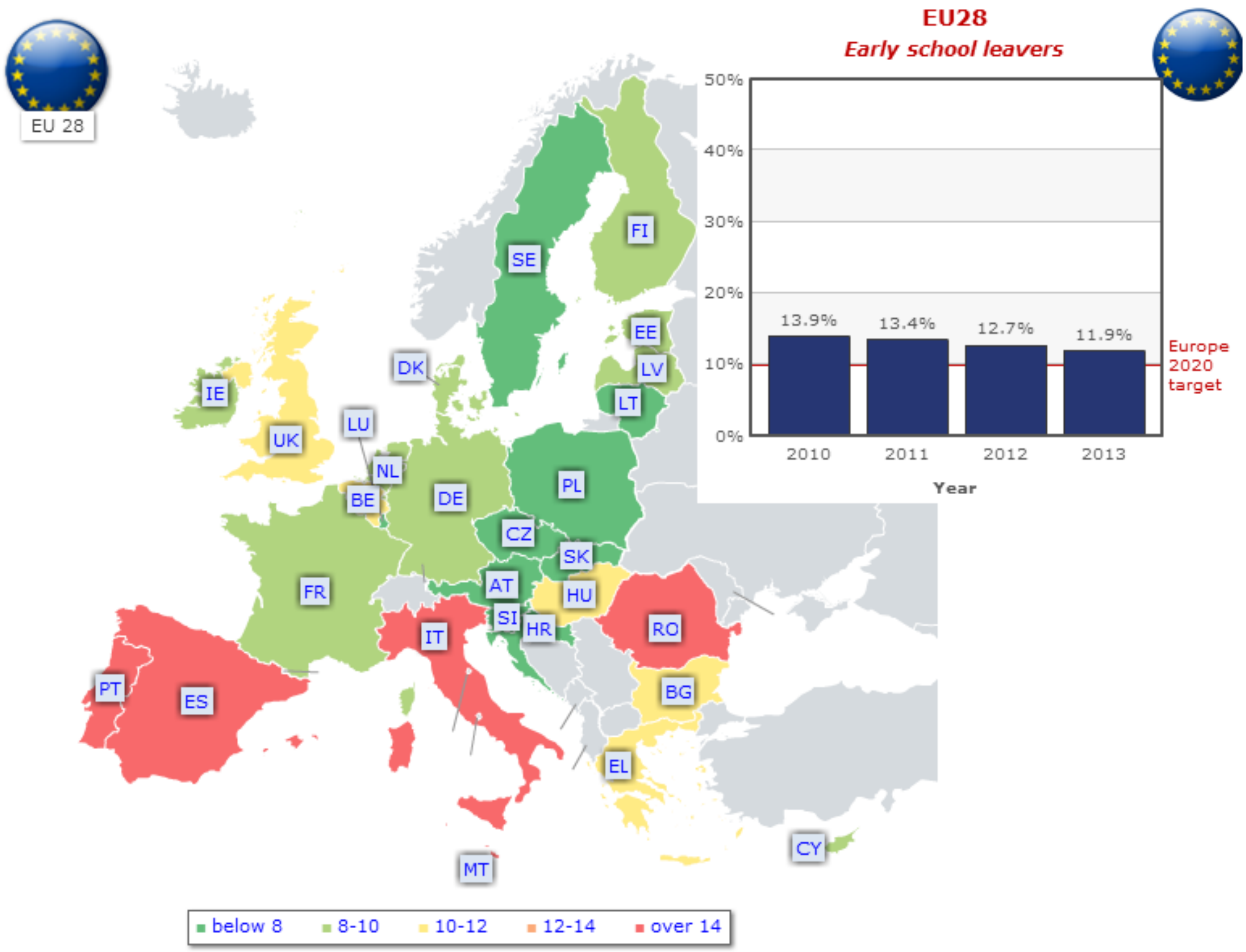
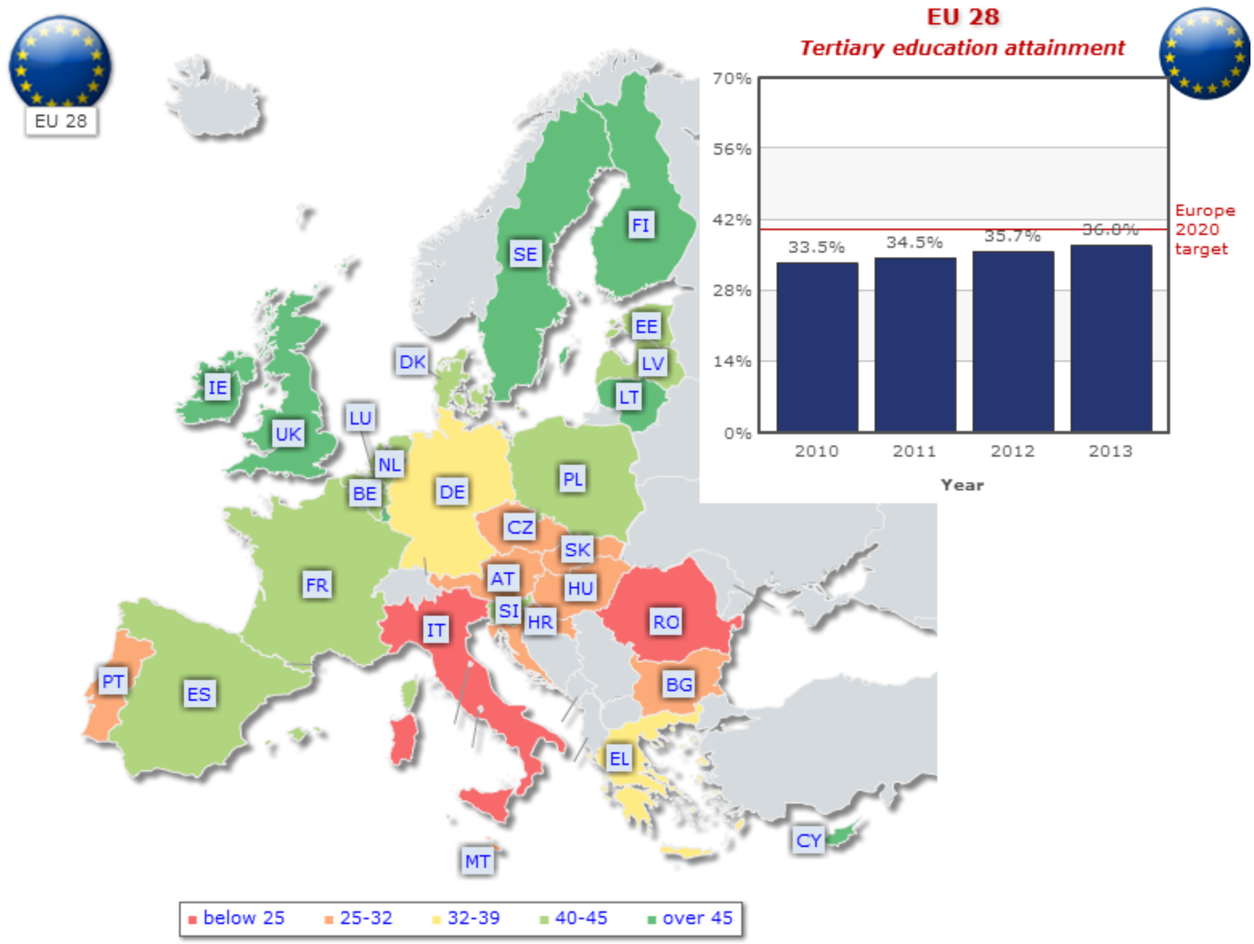


Early School Leavers



Tertiary Education Attainment



Adult Participation in Lifelong Learning