



Coordinating policies for a “Europe of knowledge”

*Emerging practices of the “Open Method of Coordination”
in education and research*

Åse Gornitzka

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Abstract

The European Union's Open Method of Coordination (OMC) is a method that in principle assumes that coordination of policies can be achieved without the use of "hard law". This paper addresses the question what the OMC represents as an instrument for European integration in the context of research and education as policy sectors. Some essential characteristics of the method *as principle* set it apart from traditional methods of European integration and inter-governmental cooperation. Yet the concept of the OMC is malleable and ambiguous. It is seemingly able to serve diverse interests with respect to speed and nature of European integration and it has been presented as a solution to a long menu of problems. The OMC *as practice* in the research and education sectors shows that under the overall conceptual heading OMC, processes evolve in ways that reflect the existing web of procedures, organisational structures and approaches within these sectors. The OMC has generated activities and gained procedural expressions in both policy sectors that are not unfolding in a uniform manner. What the OMC "is" in these two sectors is still in the making and what the OMC entails is under construction and reconstruction. It is a method in the process of learning its place in the political order of the EU, of the member states and within the sector-specific contexts.

1 Introduction

The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) has recently emerged as a policy instrument and approach to coordination in the European Union and it is seen as representing a new mode of governance. Initially confined to employment and monetary policy, the OMC has subsequently been introduced in an increasing number of policy areas. The Lisbon summit of the European Council (2000) represents a decisive moment in this development. Not only was the OMC codified at this meeting, it also led to an agreement on several new areas where the OMC was to be applied, including education and research. At the Lisbon Summit several partially interconnected developments seem to have crossed each other, including the agenda of the EU as an economic and as a social project, changes in the perspective on the EU's involvement in research and education, and the rethinking of governance issues in the European Union, hereunder the official sanctioning and labelling of the OMC.

This paper addresses two sets of questions. First we ask: what does the Open Method of Coordination represent at the level of the European Union and as an instrument for European integration? This first part presents and discusses the OMC as a *template* mode of governance. Referring to the burgeoning academic literature on the OMC some assumptions about the underlying dynamics and essential characteristics of the OMC are highlighted. In addition some alternative ways of explaining why this method was embraced by the European Union are discussed. The second part of the paper presents the emerging practical expressions of the OMC in the areas of research and education and describes some key features of these processes. This section is based on an analysis of formal documents that have been produced as part of OMC processes at the European level. The presentation of the emerging practices of the OMC in these two areas is used as a basis for an embryonic discussion of the following questions. What does applying the OMC in the areas of education and research imply for the EU's involvement in these two policy sectors? And what do the emerging practices in these two sectors tell us about the OMC as a mode of governance and the assumptions of the dynamics of this way of coordinating member states' policies?

This paper has an ulterior motive. It intends to paint a backdrop that brings together insights from the, by now, extensive academic literature on the OMC with an overview of the sector specific processes that are under way "in the name of the OMC". This backdrop will provide

a basis for the discussion that inevitably surrounds the process of singling out research questions that can be valuable and doable to pursue in the course of an ongoing empirical study of OMC processes in education and research. The latter discussion does not take place within the confines of this paper. Consequently this paper is not entirely in balance - it provides more questions than answers and bites more themes than it can chew.

2 *The OMC as a mode of governance – basic features and assumed dynamics*

2.1 **Main characteristics of the OMC in principle**

Thematically the story of the OMC goes from being developed as part of the preparation for the Monetary Union, with the accompanying Best Economic Policy Guidelines, and as a coordination mechanism for the European Employment Strategy to the inclusion of areas such as information society, research, company policy, social policy and education (Lisbon 2000), social inclusion (Nice 2000), social protection (Stockholm 2001), and environment (Gothenburg 2001). Even though the OMC has been suggested for areas outside the Lisbon agenda, such as the immigration and asylum policy, the spread of the OMC is in the first place linked to the expanding agenda of the Lisbon process. The commitment to the procedure of the OMC was included in the Lisbon Conclusions (European Council 2000: §38), explicitly identifying it as a form of governance: “Implementing this strategy [the Lisbon Strategy] will be achieved by improving the existing processes, introducing a new open method of coordination” (European Council 2000: §7). As such the Lisbon summit gave official recognition to this “method” and expanded its application. Through the link between the Lisbon strategy and the OMC a parallelism was created between the policy areas covered by the Lisbon strategy, implying that the same method is applied to both social/educational and economic areas. (Dehousse 2002: 5).

The Lisbon conclusions point to the OMC as designed to help member states progressively develop their own policies. The method is referred to as a new form of collective action to foster compatibility, consistency or convergence between member states’ public policies (Commission 2001b: 2). According to the conclusions of the Lisbon European Council (European Council 2000: §37), this method involves:

- Fixing guidelines for the Union combined with specific timetables for achieving the goals which they [the Member States] 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 specific targets and adopting measures, taking into account national and regional differences.
- Periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review¹ organised as mutual learning processes.

As a template the OMC establishes procedural routines for a systematic search for comparisons and knowledge. As such it is launched as a new approach to learning and problem solving and a measure of coordination that is not framed by formal constraints and legal sanctions. In addition the method is seen as promoting decentralised decision-making with participation from several layers and stakeholders. However, apart from those general elements there is no single authoritative depiction of the OMC that elaborates the steps and specific procedural arrangements of the method. This is seen as the flexibility of the method (de Burca and Zeitlin 2003), in the sense of an umbrella that covers a method that exists in several versions.

The work of the Convention of the European Constitution generated considerations whether the OMC should become formally part of the constitution. In the process there was a relatively broad agreement on the OMC, seen for instance in the official report of several working groups, that also favoured the inclusion of the OMC in the Constitutional Treaty (de Burca and Zeitlin 2003). Nonetheless, the final text of the Draft Constitution does not contain the phrase “Open Method of Coordination”. In this sense the Constitution did not follow up the codifying of the Lisbon conclusions through a constitutionalisation of the OMC. However, the text of the Draft Constitution on several instances includes “OMC-like” descriptions in its treatment of the coordination of economic and employment policies (Article I-14, Article III-101), social policy (Article III-104), research and technology (Article III-148), public health (Article III-179) and industry (Article III-180). The wording is typically the following (taken

¹ Peer review in this connection would mean scrutiny by wide range of EU institutions (Sisson et al 2002:16)

from Article III-148, the underlined text is new compared to the text of the Treaty of Amsterdam):

“In close cooperation with the Member States, the Commission may take any useful initiative to promote the coordination referred to in paragraph 1, in particular initiatives aiming at the establishment of guidelines and indicators, the organisation of exchange of best practice, and the preparation of the necessary elements for periodic monitoring and evaluation. The European Parliament shall be kept fully informed”

The Draft Constitution contains the nucleus of the OMC, i.e. establishment of guidelines and indicators, organised exchange of best practices, periodic monitoring and evaluation, without using the label of the Lisbon summit and without devoting a separate article to it as a mode of governance (Tsakatika 2004).

2.2 Dynamics of the OMC

The academic literature on the OMC as a new mode of governance has especially triggered an interest in the question of how policy coordination can be achieved without “hard law”. Several dynamics have been seen as taking the place of the disciplinary and coordinating force of hard law and economic sanctions.

The assumed dynamics of the method are linked to the expected coordinating capacity of the convergence of ideas (Dehousse 2002: 15; Radaelli 2004). In the official description of the method mutual learning is assumed to a basic coordinating force of the OMC (see above). The process is assumed to create sites of knowledge diffusion as well as awareness of the need to develop new information and knowledge. Through the OMC process policy decisions at the national level can be better informed as decision-makers learn from the experience of others. Policies can be coordinated through diffusion of experiences that provide incentives for learning and sharing knowledge in interactive and iterative processes (Hemerijk and Visser 2001). Potentially the OMC represents the opportunity to establish “institutionalised learning capabilities” (Olsen and Peters 1996: 13-14)

Some have argued that the OMC can represent a setting conducive to learning on the basis of deliberation. The OMC as a new model of coordination within the EU system of governance is building on systematic exchange of information and dialogue, which ideally will allow for a coordination where all parties strive for the same objective, where problem solving is based

on communicative rationality, action based on fair arguing, and where all interests have a chance to present their arguments (Jacobsson and Vifjell 2003: 415- 417).

The procedural aspects of the OMC cater also for the coordinating forces of *agenda setting and structuring of attention*. The periodic monitoring and regular/annual national reporting that is part of the OMC-procedures at the European level can be assumed to influence the attention structures in national policy-making processes as well as at the European level. They impose a specific task on the national policy-makers, especially by setting deadlines at which point national governments are expected to produce reports that can be fed back into European level OMC processes. This includes the impact of repetition (cyclic and iterative) and time schedules set by the OMC processes. The organisational characteristics of the processes may influence the coordination, by creating routines and schedules that have to be attended to, thus defining and confining Member States to a specific logic and time table from which it could be difficult to escape (Dehousse 2002: 20). The attention of policy-makers and the agenda they promote may be seriously affected by the knowledge of up and coming deadlines and “examination” points at the European level. And the agenda of national policy makers in various sectors would be periodically aligned.

Even in the absence of legal or economic sanctions, certain social sanctions and a reputational mechanism can come into play in an OMC process. The normative pressure stemming from a desire to look good or fear of being embarrassed may be a strong mechanism for converging with the European definition of good policies and striving for performing well on the indicators in cases where it is considered important to keep up with the “European Jones’s”. OMC processes would represent, in addition to a site of learning, a podium where badges of honour and shame are awarded through the presentation of national performance data in league tables and scoreboards.

Finally, the impact through and on *actor mobilisation and participatory structures* has to be taken into account. At the EU-level we can assume that the OMC processes will create new forums of actor interaction. Likewise, the OMC processes may have an impact on the participatory structures of domestic policy making leading to a reconfiguration of policy networks (Héritier 2003:119; de la Porte and Pochet 2004; de la Porte, Pochet and Room 2001).

2.3 *What is new about the OMC?*

OMC versus the Community method

If the OMC is a new mode of governance, then there is a baseline to compare it with that represents the traditional mode of governance. At the European Union level, the established mode of EU decision-making is referred to as the Community Method (CM) with its ideal of the European Commission alone making the legislative and policy proposals. In the framework of the CM the legislative and budgetary acts are adopted by the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. The use of qualified majority voting in the Council is an essential element in the CM in ensuring the effectiveness of this method. Execution of policy is in the hands of the Commission and national authorities, whereas the European Court of Justice guarantees respect for the rule of law (Commission 2001a: 8). Compared to the community method essential characteristics of a new mode of governance should be that it is *not based on legislation* and/or that it assumes different type of actor involvements, most notably the inclusion of private actors in policy formulation (Héritier 2002; 2003). Taking these two characteristics as a starting-point it is clear that the OMC is not the only new mode of governance. Scott and Trubek, for example, identify the OMC as part of a range of new modes of governance in the EU. This range comprises not only emerging *alternatives* to but also modifications of the Community method, i.e. new governance modes that are a variation of the classic Community Method. A variation of the CM is, for example, when the procedures of the CM are used not to arrive at binding uniform laws, but non-binding norms (soft law), or when they are used to allow member states substantial flexibility in the way they implement general provisions (Scott and Trubek 2002: 2).

The Commission's White Paper on Governance suggests a list of improvements of the CM specifically to increase openness and participation (Commission 2001a: 4). The White Paper on Governance explicitly sees the Open Method of Coordination as complementary and reinforcing Community action (Commission 2001a: 21). The White Paper is in tone somewhat hesitant about the OMC, listing it among a number of measures to create better policies, regulation and delivery. The Paper underlines that the OMC should not be used when legislative action under the Community Method is possible. In general it is suggested to be used on a case by case basis either alongside the programme based and legislative approach, or in areas where there is little scope for legislation. The hesitation about the OMC is made

evident in phrases such as “should not dilute” and “should not upset institutional balance” when the OMC is appraised against the Community Method²:

The Commission plays an active co-ordinating role already and is prepared to do so in the future, but the use of the method must not upset the institutional balance nor dilute the achievement of common objectives in the Treaty. In particular, it should not exclude the European Parliament from a European policy process. The open method of co-ordination should be a complement, rather than a replacement, for Community action. (Commission 2001a: 22).

Thus the assessment of the OMC when compared with the CM involves considering the relative merits of the “product” and “process”, i.e. an assessment of the means of coordination (hard versus soft law) as well as raising issues about the actors and the relative balance of institutions involved in the policy process³. Where the CM produces hard law and legal texts for transposition into national legislation, the OMC does not produce texts with such legal status. Where the CM is based on uniform implementation of European decisions, the OMC is based on European unity in goals and national or regional diversity of means. Where the policy processes of the CM are Commission-led through its right to initiate and formulate policies in the form of legislative, budgetary and programme proposals, the genesis of the OMC is primarily anchored in the Council’s decisions on objectives and benchmarks. However, as we have seen already, making these kinds of comparisons is an approximation, since they reify both the CM and the OMC. The CM is changing with more allowance for national flexibility and diversity when EU law is incorporated into national law. Several new directives are more open-ended than in the case of the classic Community Method (Trubek and Trubek *forthcoming*). Hard law is softened and assumptions of automatic transposition of EU law into national law are questioned. Concurrently, apart from the minimum characteristics identified in the Lisbon conclusions and partly retrieved in text of the Draft Constitution, the OMC is given as a label to processes that vary in the degree to which they represent hard or soft coordination of national states policy (Hartwig and Meyer 2002: 5, Maher 2004).

² There is a rather striking difference between way that this White Paper perceives the OMC and the optimistic tone of voice in e.g. the interdepartmental working group of the Commission on the issue of OMC (Commission 2001b). In addition, the working paper’s careful tone on the OMC also contrasts with especially the sector DG’s references to the method (see below), and the general enthusiasm in the European Council vis-à-vis the OMC (Scott and Trubek 2002: 16), an enthusiasm that is also reflected in the proposals from some of the working groups of the Convention process (de Búrca and Zeitlin 2003).

OMC as "third way"?

As made evident in juxtaposing the CM and the OMC the former entails a transfer of power from member states to the EU; the adoption of binding rules through qualified majority decision-making, the application of which is controlled by the Commission; a central role of the Commission in the preparation of Community Policies; and the power of the European Court of Justice to punish breaches of Community Law. All constitute significant exceptions to the principles of national sovereignty. When the OMC in several important aspects departs from the CM, does it then necessarily imply a (re)turn to intergovernmentalism? Is the nature of the OMC intergovernmental or supranational, or as proposed by several, a third way between the two? The OMC has been viewed by some as reducing the influence of the Commission relative to state control in light of the central position of the Council in the OMC processes and the recognition of the importance of national diversity (Kassim and Menon 2004: 14-15). Others see the OMC as originally and formally an intergovernmental method, but one that has developed into a supranational form of governance (Regent 2003), or being in the process of developing supranational characteristics yet of a different kind than the law-based conferral of state sovereignty to a supranational level, as it caters for a deliberative supranationalism or deliberative network governance (Jacobsson and Vifjell 2003; Hartwig and Meyer 2002). The method then has been appraised as a third way between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism that combines subsidiarity and European action in a new way, with more *joint* responsibility and than in an intergovernmental mode without conferring legal competencies to a supranational level (see: Ekengren and Jacobsson 2000: 7-10).

What is apparent from the various assessments made of the OMC is that it seemingly serves diverse and also conflicting interests with respect to speed and ways of European integration, balance of power between member states and European level, and the relative influence of different European Union institutions. First, the OMC could be seen as a victory of those who favour a state centric integration project. "The third way" proponents favoured a method as the OMC that would fit integration "with the breaks on", putting the Council and the Spring Summits in the driver's seat, reducing the roles played by the Commission, the European Court of Justice, and the European Parliament.

³ Note that in the OMC-like text of the Draft Constitution, the European Parliament is explicitly referred to as part of the process.

Second, clearly the scepticism towards the concept of the OMC could have been based on the assessment that the OMC would erode the accomplishments of European integration based on the Community Method approach and hamper rather than promote further development of the European Union as a supranational project. Yet, the interests of those who favour European integration with “the breaks *off*” could be served by the OMC as an instrument of “creeping” integration.

Third there is an argument that the celebration and embracement of the OMC and other new modes of governance have to do with the European integration project approaching the areas that are core activities for the individual member states, such as employment, social policy, migration, criminal prosecution, and education. With respect to these areas there is limited political support for harmonisation through legislation because of governments seeing their sovereignty impinged on (Héritier 2003: 105). From such a perspective the EU would need new tools to (further) enter areas with few chartered competencies. This argument is clearly the primary concern in documents such as the Working group of the Constitution Treaty. The OMC could serve such interests and enable the EU to proceed in such areas through the backdoor, yet without the legal grip on policy areas chartered by the Treaty that has been the traditional hallmark of European integration. It has been argued that the OMC is not an independent mode of governance but a preliminary stage on the way to legislation in areas that are particularly resistant to Europeanisation. However, if new modes of governance such as the OMC can be seen as having a “bridging or transition function”, (cf. Héritier 2002: 195), the use of the OMC would in the long-term perspective serve the interests of legal integrationists. The fate of the OMC in the European Convention serves to illustrate the double-sidedness of the method. The work on the draft constitutional treaty mainly came down in favour of constitutionalising the OMC as an independent and distinct instrument of EU governance, yet a minority managed to block the entry of a separate “OMC-article”. The opposition was anchored both in a federalist position (fear of OMC undermining the Community Method) and in an intergovernmental perspective (OMC as a step towards EU impinging on areas reserved for the member states) (cf. Tsakatika 2004: 93-96). The way the Draft Treaty handles the OMC, with no separate “OMC as mode of governance” article and several references to OMC-procedures in various sector articles may thus be indicative of the ambiguity of the method in terms of whose interests it serves.

OMC as “Oecdification” of the EU?

Whether the OMC should be seen as a new mode of policy coordination compared to the practices of other international arenas of cooperation or compared to modes of governance at the national level is yet another question. Most arenas of intergovernmental cooperation have a modus operandus that departs from that envisioned by the EU’s OMC. The operations of the OECD are probably the closest relative to the OMC internationally. There are obvious similarities in the work of the OECD and the OMC. The OECD has only indirectly or marginally been involved in producing or adapting international regulative frameworks. Its primary modus operandus has been “consultation” work where the ambition has been to develop a common ideational base that would eventually lead to increased policy coordination and the development of common political programmes for the entire OECD area (Marcussen 2001:1). This includes a significant number of statistical productions, publications of OECD-members’ performance on a number of statistical indicators and benchmark criteria in a range of areas, and also peer-review processes and consequent peer pressure. All of these are elements also found in the depiction of the OMC, and some have voiced that the OMC implies an “Oecdification” of the EU. The OMC certainly involves a quantification of the policy process where the main mode of interlocution is statistical data. In this respect it does not stray very far from instruments of coordination found in the OECD, which is largely operating in the same policy territory of the Lisbon-OMC (economic policy, environmental policy, employment, research and education). But as pointed out by Noakssen and Jacobsen (2003), the OECD is in essence an expert organisation whereas the similar types of procedures within the EU settings, such as in OMC processes, are set in a overtly political setting whose dynamics rest on the politically agreed objectives of the EU member states and the positioning of the range of other modes of governance within the EU web of institutions and instruments. By being linked to commonly agreed upon objectives and through assuming a clear link between the European level processes and national policies, it can be argued that the OMC is different from the processes of intergovernmental forums, the OECD included. That does not imply that other assumed dynamics are uniquely “OMC”. Many of the assumed dynamics of the OMC have been identified at other international arenas. Learning across national borders is not new to national policy making. National policies are informed and influenced by experiences elsewhere, through diffusion and translations of ideas, and in such learning and diffusion processes international organisations are known to play a significant role as “distribution centres” (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000, Olsen 2004a). However, with the application of the OMC, policy transfer and learning takes place in a different setting.

OMC as "EU-washed" private sector practices?

The use of benchmarks and statistical indicators in the public sector, as an institutionalised part of public policy making, is largely known from the national level. The use of statistical indicators, performance measures and benchmarks have proliferated and become common-day practice in national policy making in many sectors. This development is generally seen as part of the spread of new public management practices and ideologies and the "managerial" revolutions in public policy spheres that are in turn modelled on management approaches and tools in the private sector. Yet, ideas that travel under identical headings from one context to another might represent quite diverse practices (Czarniawska and Joerges 1998). Elements such as benchmarking and the use of performance indicators have not been unaffected by the change from operating in the context of the private sector to the public sector, and now to the European level. Peer review of economic policy is certainly different from the institution of peer review in academia (Langfeldt 2002). Benchmarking in a multinational company is different from benchmarking as part a regulatory instrument of the nation state or the EU (Arrowsmith et al 2004). As pointed to by Sisson et al (2000:9), benchmarking in the industrial/corporate management version assumes, for example, a possible balance between central control and local responsibility. Yet transported to the European Union and put in the context the OMC, the implementation aspect of benchmarking gets a different setting than in the corporate version. One major difference is that companies have a range of control mechanisms to make sure that managers comply with "the lessons learned" from the benchmarking exercise.

A preliminary conclusion would be to say that the novelty of the OMC lies in three main elements. First it links to commonly identified and agreed upon political objectives. Second the systematic and iterative nature of the method. Third the link to a larger political order of the EU. However, what the OMC "is", i.e. the quest for the true nature of the OMC, is addressed best not in the singular but in the plural mode. The nature(s) of this method as a mode of governance will have to be analysed in the context within which it is applied and given meaning. At this point the OMC represents new elements to instruments of integration at the European level in at least two ways. First, it is new in comparison to the basic elements of the Community Method. Second, even though the use of benchmarks, indicators and spread of best/good practice have been used in international settings, at the national level, in private

enterprises and in public organisations, the introduction of such procedures as systematic measures of coordination is new to the European level setting.

2.4 Why OMC?

The scholarly, political, and practical debates on the OMC mirror and involve a range of issues, including the basic characteristics of various types of governance modes and steering instruments, the assessment of means of European integration, and the relative merits of various social and economic models. Assessments of what the method represents do not necessarily answer the question of why the OMC was recognised officially, embraced by policy makers and introduced in so many policy areas of the EU. In the academic literature on the OMC this question has been discussed seriously by only a handful of scholars (cf. Schäfer 2004; Tsakatika 2004). Also in the general literature on shifts in governance, less attention has been paid to the analysis and identification of causal mechanisms that underlie governance changes than to descriptions of such shifts (Van Keersbergen and Van Waarden 2004: 165-166). The embrace and spread of the OMC could be seen as a natural or calculated response to changing circumstances that the traditional mode of governance was unable to cope with, such as increasing complexity of the issues on the European, coping with diversity of an enlarged EU, and addressing the democratic deficit issue. Or it could be seen as backed by a winning coalition whose interest would be served by the introduction of such a method. Apart from the important endorsement at the Lisbon summit in 2000, several smaller decisions have been made from the early development of the EMU and EES, Lisbon and the subsequent European Council summits where the OMC was either coined as a phrase or pinned to new areas. If the introduction and spread of the method are a result of calculus and the relative power of certain political and institutional interests it is rather obvious that these choices have been made under uncertainty about the possible implications. There are multiple meanings as to what interests the OMC would serve. The malleable character and equivocal understanding of the OMC must most likely have made it attractive as a compromise between various competing intra-EU interests concerning speed and type of integration. The OMC represented a seemingly feasible method that could be presented as a solution to a long menu of problems. Also the OMC deferred the confrontation over varying interests with respect to European integration to the future and separated them in the several arenas hosting the various OMC processes.

Also there are some characteristics of the OMC that may indicate that this change of governance mode fits a pattern of spread of organisational structures and forms, as well as more temporarily viable management fashions or fads. The OMC might not necessarily rely on matching functional requirements or the support of a winning coalition in order to survive and proliferate, but it can ride on cognitive and normative tidal waves of what constitutes good and appropriate modes of governance (Olsen 1998: 335). The OMC has become part of a common policy language, or “linguistic” integration when very different actors and sectors can tap into the same label for coordinating policies. One could argue that precisely these characteristics make the OMC officially perceived as an appropriate and legitimate mode of governance and facilitate its application in very different policy and institutional contexts. The reference that policy makers in the EU can make to “applying the OMC” would then represent an affirmation of commitments to good governance in general, to legitimate and appropriate ways of integration, as well as to the Lisbon strategy. A main characteristic of the brief history of the OMC so far is the way in which it has been able to come to represent a solution to very diverse sets of problems, and to accommodate various and also conflicting interests. This might indicate that the “why” of the OMC may be also be understood as a process of “contagion”.

Finally, one should not underestimate the impact of the encounter of several change processes within the EU that occurred in the Lisbon summit. There was a need to point to plausible means of achieving an ambition that was set and agreed upon in Lisbon, and when this coincided with an ongoing debate on the vices of the traditional means of governance in the EU, the time was ripe for a method like the OMC to be accepted. However, we cannot assume that the spread of a method such as the OMC will demonstrate high reproductive reliability, i.e. that it can be applied in various settings without being transformed (see March 1999: 137-138). How this method has been taken on board in the various areas where it was announced should be understood in the context of the areas in which it enters and the characteristics of the trajectory of the development of these policy areas. In the following we turn to how the OMC as a method has produced some emerging practices in the contexts of education and research policies at the European level.

3 *Education and research in the Lisbon strategy and the emerging practices of the OMC*

3.1 *Lisbon – a new policy paradigm for education and research?*

The Lisbon summit did not invent the EU's involvement in education and research. Both areas have long traditions as policy areas for the EU. Education has a more tense and hesitant history of European level activities than research. The research policy of the EU has gradually evolved to become a highly dense area of activities. With the expansion of the multi-annual framework programmes, research represents a major item on the EU budget. Also the educational programmes of the EU are quoted regularly among the major successes of the EU. However, the EU's involvement in both is not uncontested and is certainly not following a steady linear progress going from cooperation, to coordination towards full integration. Therefore it is of relevance to ask what the Lisbon summit and the introduction of the OMC meant to these policy areas.

First of all we need to be reminded that as an overall political project, the Lisbon strategy is open for various interpretations, and is part of ongoing attempts to define what it represents (see e.g. the reactions to the Work group report: Kok 2004b, EUobserver 3/11/04⁴). Several have suggested that the Lisbon strategy is embedded in neo-liberal ideology (Radaelli 2003; Chalmers and Lodge 2003). Yet already in the text of the Lisbon conclusions the focus is not uniquely on competitiveness as the single objective; the text draws a triangle with competitiveness, employment and social cohesion as its three nodes (Tucker 2003: 10). Also through the meetings of heads of states that followed after Lisbon, the agenda of the Lisbon strategy was expanded. Obviously it cannot be concluded that the Lisbon strategy only represents economic aspects.

It is also possible to read it as a marriage between a neo-liberal ideology and a social welfare model (Zängle 2004). At least it can be interpreted as an attempt of “horizontal integration”, i.e. linking the social and economic aspects of European integration (Borrás and Jacobsson 2004: 186; Olsen 2004b: 4). There are some core assumptions concerning the primary factors that affect economic competitiveness (especially to be read from the structural indicators) and a definition of what kind of economic environment Europe is faced with. Yet, the Lisbon summit represents more an agenda than a full-fledged “theory of competitiveness

⁴ <http://euobserver.com/?iad=1768&sid=9>

and social cohesion”. As such this agenda reflects the vagueness that is presumably necessary for reaching consensus on some overarching common goals for the member states.

All European summits from Lisbon 2000 and onwards have underlined the contribution of research and education in setting up the European knowledge society, and becoming “... *the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion*” (European Council 2000). As an expression of an underlying educational and research policy paradigm, the Lisbon Summit does at least three things: 1) reasserts the role of R&D for economic competitiveness and growth 2) underlines education as a core labour market factor as well as a factor in social cohesion 3) asks for a focus on *common* concerns and priorities (Lisbon Conclusion §27), as opposed to taking as a point of departure the national diversity of education and research systems (cf. Hingel 2001: 15). The Lisbon triangle of employment, growth and social cohesion has education as an element (cf. Kok 2004a) and sees research as a major cornerstone of the Lisbon strategy (Kok 2004b). The Lisbon summit does not acknowledge education as a “teleological” policy area, a policy in itself. In the Lisbon-agenda education is part of social policy, labour market policy and overall economic policy. The Lisbon agenda can be seen as the embodiment of a common model of socio-economic development, or a “world script” (Meyer 2000), with an emphasis on science-based innovation as the engine of economic development. In this education is seen as a necessary form of investment in human capital. This script is contained in one single term, “knowledge economy”. The Lisbon strategy provides a practical-political expression of the way in which education and research as policy areas are defined and framed within a knowledge society/economy discourse. Yet this political expression is moulded and redefined continuously. For instance, what the concept of “knowledge” is supposed to encompass is far from settled and agreed upon.

Of course, the conclusions of the Lisbon summit did not “fall from the sky”. The ideas that found their way into the text of the Lisbon conclusions have a long history. The OECD must be seen as a core international site where the idea of the knowledge economy has been developed and pushed (cf. especially OECD 1996). The ideas of the knowledge economy or “the new economy” have clearly been developed in interaction with a scientific and political agenda in Europe (cf. Rodrigues 2002). The concept has also been visible on the EU agenda, with a close link especially to research, and its ideational heritage can be traced at least from the early 1990s. A core reference in this respect is Delors’ 1993 White Paper on

Competitiveness, Growth and Employment. But also education has been a longstanding item on the agenda of the European Roundtable of Industrialists (e.g. “Reshaping Europe” from 1991). For instance, the ERT’s education policy group published reports, such as *Education for Europeans – Towards the Learning Society* (1995) that were reported to have been “enthusiastically acclaimed by the Commission” (Richardson 2000: 20). In the EES education is featured as part of the employment and labour market strategy of the EU (Hingel 2001). To realize the ambition agreed in Lisbon, the role of education and training is considered to be crucial. Without a high quality education and training system it is impossible to make the transition towards a knowledge based society and to further develop the knowledge based economy. For reaching the Lisbon ambition not only a “radical transformation of the European economy “(European Council 2000: §1) is required, but also a “challenging programme for the modernisation of social welfare and education systems” (European Council 2000: §2). In the view of the Commission the Lisbon conclusions represented a landmark for the EU’s involvement in education: “Never before had the European Council acknowledged to this extent the role played by education and training systems in the economic and social strategy and the future of the Union (Commission 2003c: 3).

However, the role of research and education does not feature prominently among the so-called structural indicators that are reported on by the Commission to the Spring Councils. In the 2004 report there were 16 structural indicators in the statistical appendix; of them only two pertained directly to research and education (Gross domestic expenditure on R&D and youth educational attainment). This reflects just a fraction of the indicators that have been developed in these areas (see below). Also the High Level Group led by Wim Kok with the mandate to independently review the mid-term achievements of the Lisbon strategy, laments the lack of actual attention to the “knowledge dimension” of the Lisbon strategy⁵. Yet in the Kok report knowledge is practically solely interpreted as R&D and it contains very few references to education and training, an aspect which in turn is lamented by spokespersons for this sector (cf. e.g. Commissioner for Education, Figel (2004)).

Consequently we have to underline that also when it comes to education/training and research the Lisbon texts and strategy as such contain only the sketches of an underlying “education and research policy theory”. The subsequent OMC processes, and the texts produced by various actors in this process represent the way in which meaning is given to

⁵ “One of the most disappointing aspects of the Lisbon strategy to date is that the importance of R&D remains so little understood and that so little progress has been made” (Kok 2004b: 19)

these aspects of EU's education and research policy. This takes place, amongst other things, in the practices that are emerging as part of the open method of coordination in research and education. Simultaneously, these practices can give meaning to the OMC as a mode of governance in the thematic and institutional context of these sectors.

3.2 Emerging practices of OMC in research and education - the organisational and procedural expressions of OMC at the European level

The OMC and education

Following the general Lisbon ambition, the Council of Ministers for Education agreed in 2001 on three strategic goals for European education and training systems. First to improve the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU. Second to facilitate the access of all to education and training systems. Third to open up education and training systems to the wider world. These very broad strategic goals for European education and training systems were refined in 13 associated objectives adopted by the Education ministers in 2002⁶. In May 2003, the Education Council selected five benchmarks for the improvement of education and training systems in Europe up to 2010⁷. These European benchmarks are not concrete targets for *individual* countries to be reached by 2010. They are defined by the Council as “reference levels of European *average* performance”. However, in a number of member states, including Austria and the Netherlands, those European benchmarks are set as targets for national education policy (Kaiser 2004).

An organizational apparatus was set up as part of the OMC process at the European level and DG Education had a core role in orchestrated the process. From the second half of 2001 *eight working groups* were established in order to implement the common objectives. In 2002 a *Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks (SGIB)* was established to advice the Commission on the use of existing indicators and benchmarks and the development of new ones. In addition the SGIB was expected to evaluate the indicators suggested by the working groups in relation to the objectives and the availability and relevance of data within each indicator area (Kaiser 2004). The work of the SGIB also approached the use of composite indicators, i.e. indicators that combine and aggregate information on several key indicators (cf. Saltelli et al 2004; Kaiser 2004:11). Also the work of this group has brought to the fore

⁶ ‘Detailed work program for monitoring the progress towards these strategic goals until 2010’,

⁷ Council Conclusions of 5 May 2003 on “Reference Levels of European Average Performance in Education and Training (Benchmarks)” (OJ C 134, 7.6.2003).

the relationship between the EU as an information provider and producer of statistical information and other international data providers, especially the OECD. Compared to the R&D statistics educational statistics are less broadly covered by the standard data from the OECD, although the OECD has a significant statistical production of educational data (cf. the bi-annual report *Education at a Glance*). The work of the SGIB has been revolving around the uncovering the informational needs of the Lisbon strategy in the area of education and linking these to existing data/studies and in so doing shaping the role of EU producing policy relevant data.

The national representatives to groups that have been set up specifically for the OMC in education are predominantly drawn from national ministries and government agencies. National representatives are also taken from academic and professional units, such as Educational development centres. The membership has further included representatives from stakeholders (European level associations for interest groups such as Unions (e.g. ETUCE), European School Heads Association, UNICE), the Commission and in some cases also from international organisations, most notably the OECD and The Council of Europe.

The working groups have produced progress reports of their work in the spring of 2003⁸. Most working groups explicitly presented their work as undertaken within the framework of the Open Method of Coordination. Further most of the working groups recognised a need to attend to not only indicator development, but also peer review and exchange of good practice. Some of the reports included examples of good practices from various national settings. Most of the attention in consultation processes was centred on the indicators, i.e. their relative merits, measures and relationship to available data, and the need for development of indicators (cf. report from SGIB June 2003). The Commission's Education DG has so far been central in managing the process of indicator development. The DG is responsible for writing the official documents that go to the Education Council. The documents going to the European Council are written jointly by the Commission and the Education Council, among them the core document on the progress towards the Lisbon education objectives. The commission published a main assessing document in November 2003 that contained a serious and rather pessimistic picture of the progress made towards reaching the goals set for Education and Training systems in Europe (Commission 2003c). This document calls,

amongst other things, for Member States to submit each year from 2004 a consolidated report on all the actions they take on education and training to increase “the impact and efficiency of the OMC” (Commission 2003c: 17). The joint report of the Council and the Commission also contains similar references to the need for a more coordinated reporting in order to monitor progress and strengthen cooperation, although a phrase on the need to avoid “creating too much bureaucracy” has been added to the text of the joint report (Council and Commission 2004: 32). So far only Norway and Sweden have produced a national report of this kind. And the actual peer reviewing of the national actions taken as part of the OMC process has not come very far.

The thematic areas covered by the OMC process in education, the combination of strategic goals, associated objectives, and the benchmarks and indicators, suggest that the OMC process has changed the emphasis of the European level perspective on education. With respect to the main instruments for European level education, i.e. the EU education programmes, there is a prominence of activities directed at higher education/vocational education and student/staff mobility. These have been the traditional areas to which the EU has directed its attention. The goals, objectives and benchmarks included in the OMC process on the other hand cover the whole education system. The OMC process and especially the benchmarks focus mainly on secondary education, and they give, comparatively speaking, much less attention to the objectives, indicators and benchmarks relevant to *higher* education.

A second observation is that in part some of the indicators go much further into areas traditionally considered to be very close to areas of national sovereignty in education, such as curricular content, teacher training, language learning, and strengthening the ties to work life. These are areas that have aroused nation state versus European level disputes in the history of the EU/EC’s involvement in education (de Wit and Verhoeven 2001). Goals related to structural convergence of education systems are still not an issue in the OMC process. For higher education this is a dominant theme of the intergovernmental *Bologna process* that has the ambition of creating a European Higher Education Area. That process in turn is also seen as linked to the Lisbon strategy. For instance, the Commission foresees that the reporting on the progress towards the education and training goals by the member states should include reporting on the changes included in the Bologna process (Commission 2003c).

⁸ Working group reports at http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/objectives_en.html

A third observation concerns the links between the different objectives as well as the links between different indicators and the benchmarks that are supposed to be used for monitoring progress. These have been largely uncoordinated, in the sense that there is an *assumed* hierarchy of strategic goals and objectives. Especially the SGIB is attempting to make ex post rationales for the ex ante political ambitions, i.e. it tries to construct in retrospect the underlying policy theory that specifies links between different factors.

The OMC education seems so far to have settled in a rather clear organisational structure consisting of the web of specially erected working groups with national representatives, the SGIB, whose work covers all thematic areas, and the DG education as a driving force in setting the agenda, proposing for the Education Council and in providing the written material that goes to the Spring European Council. The OMC process in the education area seems also to have established a relationship with the existing instruments of the EU's education policy. The new generation of programmes prepared for the period from 2007, will be more closely integrated with the overall objectives of the EU. The Education Council, for instance, considers that the programmes should enhance the complementarity between policies in the field of education and training, and social and economic strategies. The Council underlines "the importance of ensuring that the programmes better support policy developments at the European level in education and training, notably in relation to the Lisbon strategy and to the strategic objectives provided in the 'Report on the concrete future objectives of education and training systems'" (Council 2004: 25). What kinds of specific changes in the programmes this might entail remains unclear, given that the profile of these programmes is different from most of the themes covered by the OMC process in education. However, it is clearly the ambition to integrate the EU's traditional incentive based educational programmes with the coordination process that the Lisbon strategy has activated and also to use legal means in the Lisbon related reforms. For instance, the directive that was adopted on the recognition of professional qualifications was seen as part of the "legislative roadmap" of the Lisbon strategy (Commission 2004c). On the other hand, the Draft Constitution did not give any formal recognition of the use of OMC in this policy area; it still remains an "unchartered" activity that derives its formal legitimacy from the Lisbon conclusions⁹.

⁹ Right to education is included in the Charter of Human Rights of the Draft Constitution, still remains an area where the legal powers are limited. The Draft Constitution provides the basis for programmes and incentive action in the area of education, yet it does represent a legal reconfirmation of "no harmonisation" in the area of

The OMC and research:

The Lisbon European Council packed the use of the OMC into the ambition of developing a European Research Area (ERA)¹⁰ that in turn was framed as part of the instruments of the 2010-Lisbon target. As part of ERA the Lisbon Conclusions encouraged “the development of an open method of coordination for benchmarking national research and development policies” (European Council: Lisbon conclusions §13). Following the Lisbon summit the European Council made some key decisions towards coordination of national research policies. Besides endorsing the broad notion of the European Research Area, the Barcelona Council in 2002 agreed on the very ambitious goal of increasing investments in R&D to 3 percent of EU GDP, from the 2000-level of 1,9 percent. The Barcelona objective also stated that private sector investment would represent 2/3 of this investment. That was the first time a commitment was made to a quantitative target for research was made at such a high level (Caracostas 2003:36). Further underlining of the role of research for economic competitiveness could be read from the decision to change the configuration of the Council in 2002 to a Competitiveness Council consisting of the previous Internal Market, Industry and Research Councils. Also the Commission reiterated the fundamental role carved out for research in fostering growth, competitiveness and employment, and emphasised the need to meet the 3% target since it is seen as critical to the Europe’s competitiveness (see for instance Commission 2003a and 2004b) The Commission claimed wide support for this target from member states and other core actors such as the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of regions and important social partners (Commission 2003b:5-6).

In the area of research the open method of co-ordination is set in a complex web of various efforts and means of co-ordination within the framework of the ERA¹¹. Identifying *the* OMC process in research is not a straightforward task as several processes especially linked to the ERA activities are referred to as “OMC”. The Commission foresaw the use of OMC to support research and innovation policy in relation to five different areas, the “3-percent Action Plan”, human resources and mobility, science and society and networking of national

education (article III-182-4). This is not unique for education. Other areas of equal importance for fundamental rights have similar limitation of EU competencies, such as the field of health (Bernard 2003).

¹⁰ The Commission paved the way for the ERA through their Communication “Towards a European Research Area” of 18 January 2000 (Commission 2000). The Council made the official resolution “on the Creation of a European Research and Innovation Area” 15 June 2000. The ERA is also codified as part of the Constitutional Treaty.

¹¹ This comprises the Community Framework programmes (including Networks of Excellence and Integrated projects), technology platforms, coordination of national research council programmes (ERA-NET) and the possible development of the a European Research Council (see Khulman and Edler 2004, Gronbaek 2003)

research programmes (ERA-net), and RTD-infrastructure (CREST 2003b: 7). Up to 2004 the general quantitative monitoring and reporting was presented in the form the statistical publication prepared by DG research on the core indicators “Towards a European Research Area – Science and Technology and Innovation - Key Figures”. These publications presented the national performance on a range of indicators related to the R&D investment target. Yet these publications have had little best practice information or qualitative peer review assessments of national performance. The latter is more evident in the annual report on structural reforms from the European Economic Policy Committee where the knowledge based economy indicators also feature (see EPC 2003). In the year following the Lisbon Council the commission worked on several versions of OMC processes related to research (Commission 2000), or including what was later referred to as “o.m.c light” (CREST 2003a: 2) and “activities that contain elements of omc” (CREST 2003b: 7). In the following we briefly present two processes that represent main embodiments of the OMC in research policy.

The OMC quickly gained a procedural expression after 2000 through “the first cycle of benchmarking national research policies”. It started September 2000 and ended January 2003. The Lisbon Council specified a short deadline by which date indicators for assessing performance should be identified, and that meant in practice that the OMC processes should start off using available indicators. The first cycle of the OMC research exercise then would refine the methods and indicators of the benchmarking. The organisation of this process is different from the organisational set-up used in the OMC education (see above). A High Level Group was created with representatives from each member state nominated by the respective research ministers. Their task was amongst others to propose relevant indicators and elaborate the methodology of the five selected by the Research Council (human resources, investments productivity, RTD impact on competitiveness and employment) (Commission 2000). For each theme five indicators were chosen of which 15 were available and five were to be developed by the European statistical system. The Commission organised a small task force which included representatives from EUROSTAT and OECD to deal with indicator development. Already in November 2000 the 15 available indicators were presented for the Research Council where they “received a positive welcome” (Commission 2001c (annex): 4). The High Level Group was seen as the focal point of the process (Commission 2001c: 9) a.o.t. because it secured the information exchange and involvement of the national statistical services (Caracostas 2003). The Commission set up five expert groups for each of the themes identified by the Council to assist in the benchmarking process. The main task of

the expert groups was to “describe good practices for their theme areas, the processes by which they were achieved and analyse possibilities for transferring good practices in different national contexts and draw conclusions on implication for future policy” (Commission 2001c: 9). The members of these groups were predominantly drawn from academic communities in relevant fields, some appointed by the Commission, some by member states. Yet their membership was on the basis of their expertise not as representatives of national or social interests. Each group seem to have had extensive cooperation with the relevant directorates in the DG Research¹². The results of the work in these groups were presented the summer of 2002. During the fall of 2002 five “Benchmarking Workshops” were organised building on the expert groups’ conclusions and with presentations of some “good practice” experiences.

The next stage of the main OMC process in research revolved around the Barcelona target (“3-percent target”). This was part of the overall Lisbon strategy and R&D investment as percentage of GDP became the prime structural indicator of the Lisbon strategy that refers directly to research. Subsequent to that decision, the Commission started working out the plans for how this objective could be realised. In September 2002, they issued a communication on how to reach the Barcelona target, yet procedural prescriptions for how to apply the OMC were weakly described (Commission 2002c). Two months later the Competitiveness Council accentuated the need to push the use of OMC forward and invited COREPER to “examine the concrete use of an open method of coordination” (Council 2002: 4). In the Commission staff working paper “Investing in Research – an Action Plan for Europe” (Commission 2003b, final version issued in April 2003), the European guidelines were given for how to work towards the 3-percent target. In this document the Commission proposed that member states or other relevant levels would set national targets for the overall investment target and for the other reference indicators. The monitoring and reporting was foreseen to be organised in an overall process where all member states would take part, whereas the focussed benchmarking exercises would be based on voluntary participation (Commission 2003b: 33). The Commission proposed that the subjects for benchmarking would be selected “in consultation with the member states”, and that these benchmarking processes would use a similar expert group structure as was the case in the first cycle. Yet, the experiences of the first round saw that when the analysis and comparisons of the best practices were carried out by groups of experts rather than national representatives, that part

¹² See the five expert group reports <http://www.cordis.lu/rtd2002/era-developments/benchmarkinghtm#results>

of the OMC process became poorly anchored in the member states (Caracostas 2003). In May 2003 the Council formally discussed the Commission's set up for the OMC related to the 3%-target. In the meetings that took place in the Competitiveness Council (13th May), COREPER, and in the Presidency, with the Commission's involvement, the Scientific and Technical Research Committee (CREST) was charged with a key role in the organisation of the "3%-OMC process". In September 2003 the European Council made the formal resolution on the 3-percent target that included a reference to using CREST "to define and oversee the implementation of the open method of coordination in respect to the 3% objective, with a view to becoming rapidly operational, recognising that the work of CREST in this respect will need active links with other ongoing actions to strengthen competitiveness" (Council 2003: 10). In the fall 2003 CREST appointed five expert groups to work on tasks related to the 3 percent target and whose chairperson reported to CREST¹³. From January the following year the application of the OMC was on the agenda of every CREST-meeting. Given the mandate and composition of CREST the orchestration of the OMC is thus placed not in the hands of the Commission but in this permanent committee that comprises member states representatives (top civil servants from national research ministries) and representation from DG research, i.e. the interface between the Member States and the Commission. The Commission representative in CREST clearly stated that the 3% OMC is to be seen as an operation driven by the member states where the Commission is "offering assistance as a facilitator" (CREST 2003: 8). CREST has also been given the task of writing the report on the progress towards the 3%-target, and provide guidelines for development of national policy measures as well as recommendations for Community action. It is clear that this OMC process has evolved into a test case for role and function this committee on a more general level. It has been referred to as "probably the most strategically important task CREST has been entrusted with; it is therefore a very important test for its potential to deliver practical results" (CREST 2004a: 4). After all the coordination of the national research policies was part of the original 1974 mandate as well as the revised mandate of 1995 of this committee¹⁴. In this respect the application of the OMC has revitalised a function of CREST to which its 30 years of existence has not produced much result. The OMC for the 3%-target is still not settled in a clear procedures, and is currently undergoing revisions of its operational set-up

¹³ All expert groups produced their final report to CREST in June 2004 and all of them clearly identified their work as part of the OMC 3 % Action Plan.

¹⁴ Council Resolution of 28 September 1995 on Crest (95/C 264/02)

(CREST 2004d and 2005) to deal with the “teething problems”¹⁵ that have come to the fore in the first cycle of the OMC for the 3% Action Plan..

4 Implications of a new mode of governance in education and research - tentative interpretations

What does the introduction of the OMC do to these two policy areas and do the Lisbon agenda and the method it carries signify a shift in the governance of education and research? Both research and education have seen organisational and procedural expressions of OMC at the European level. Processes referred to as “OMC” were set in motion quickly after the Lisbon summit. Targets have been agreed, benchmarks and indicators have been identified. These processes built on activities that were already undertaken at the European level, but in both cases new, yet ad-hoc, organisational units and arenas were created to host the OMC processes. In the case of education the OMC has a clear, easily identifiable procedural expression. OMC is an umbrella within which it takes place, and it seems that the OMC and the Lisbon strategy have served to *enable* European activities. In research policy the OMC does not seem to be a focal point to the same extent. The idea of the European Research Area sucks up most of the attention of the policy makers. This is a concept and label that covers a dense set of activities and instruments, where there are several processes that are referred to as “OMC”. The Lisbon summit clearly gave a boost to the idea of developing an ERA and legitimised that project. A further legitimisation is found in the reference to the ERA in the Draft Constitution. Yet, also here the OMC has generated new activities and “recharged” units that already formally were set to handle coordination of national policies. The mere comparison between the two areas show that under the overall conceptual heading OMC, processes evolve in various ways that reflect the existing web of procedures, organisational structures and approaches within these sectors. However, what OMC “is” in these two sectors is still in the making and this method is in the process of learning or taking its place in the EU’s approach in terms of substance and form in these two policy areas. Furthermore the evidence presented from the so far emerging practices can only serve as indications of what the experiences with these processes in research and education tell us about the OMC as a mode of governance. Earlier we have pointed to several arguments that can be used to understand why OMC was introduced and embraced. In the following, these are used as

¹⁵ Term used in the report from the CREST expert group on SME and Research (Final report June 2004: 14).

dimensions for discussing the implications of and indicative lessons learned from applying the OMC in the areas of education and research.

One label - several versions

First there are some signs that we are seeing an institutionalisation of the OMC in the fields of education and research.

- Establishment of procedures, organisational structures such as committees, working groups, especially in education there are clear working groups and bodies that are explicitly “OMC-specific”.
- Established structures are getting OMC added to their mandate (CREST in the area of research)
- Numerous decisions that are made around indicators and benchmarks
- Documents are generated that gather information on the development towards the objectives and the performance on all of the benchmarks

These signs all point in the direction that OMC is made “real” in these policy sectors. So far it has attracted attention and energy. It is not obvious that that energy level is equal among all participants and that is sustainable over time (see below). The OMC can be seen as a variation over a theme with convergence of labels and diversity of procedural set-ups. There are various perceptions of the OMC also between the two sectors and also within the research policy area. There is not one uniform procedure generated by the efforts to apply the method. The reification of the label identified in section 2 is not accompanied by a uniformation of practices. If indeed the spread of OMC can be seen as a process of contagion, then it is the label is *diffused* and the accompanying practices that are *translated* into context of the various sectors (cf. Latour 1987; Sevón 1998). However, the label is not devoid of standardising elements – there are certain common recurring “essentials” in the procedures that have been set in motion, especially the Council decisions on benchmarks in both sectors, and the predominance of statistical and indicator work.

Changing the actor constellations and widening participation?

The experiences from the OMC in these two sectors are ambiguous from the perspective of OMC representing new actor constellations in policy processes at the European level. This is a question that requires data far beyond overviews of formal procedures and analysis of formal documents produced in the OMC processes so far. Comparing the formal procedures of the other dominant modes of governance in this sector, we see that the European

Parliament is absent in these processes, that the Council is heavily involved in the core decisions especially in terms of deciding on the benchmarks. The Commission's role in the OMC processes is central, especially in the "day-to-day" running of these processes. Yet it seems that two sectors' respective DGs do not have identical roles – there are indications that the role of the DG education is stronger and clearer in the OMC processes compared to the DG research. In the OMC research the special committee for research policy (CREST) has formally been charged with a core function in the OMC process of the 3% target. The OMC processes in research and education have strong participation from expertise communities in both sectors in combination with civil servants from the national ministries. That is not to say that the latter are seen primarily as representatives of national interest; clearly they are meant to work in the context of the OMC as national *experts*. The involvement of statistical experts in the policy process has been enhanced through the OMC, as a main part of the attention in the OMC process especially in education has been devoted to statistical indicators. Whether the OMC represents an arena for opening up participation from a broader range of stakeholders in these two policy areas is difficult to assess. The participation from expertise community has undoubtedly been present, and also the membership in various working groups has included European level stakeholder organisations. However, stakeholder participation is not present in two of the main OMC bodies, SGIB in education and CREST in research. There are so far no grounds for speculating whether stakeholder representation in the OMC processes represents a widening participation compared to such participation in other processes of the European level involvement in these sectors.

Enabling "lawless" European action and pointing out a "third way"?

Thematically the OMC processes that this paper have referred to in the area of research and education have in part generated collective and organised attention at the European level to areas not traditionally at the core of European research and education policy. In research policy the 3% target represents potentially a significant commitment on the part of the national government as it can affect the profile of public spending and redistribution of resources through for instance the use of tax incentive schemes to increase private investment in R&D. In education the attention has been directed at other levels of education than higher education and it has moved closer to parts of education (such as content of teaching and learning) that have traditionally been shirking European coordination. The template applied in education implies a potentially huge and fateful task of setting the future objectives of national education system – which in itself strongly points in the direction of an *enabling*

capacity of OMC. Also in this area the OMC seems to have implied that the task of defining collective goals have been “uploaded” to the EU arena (Borràs and Jacobsson 2004: 197). In this sense the OMC has generated new (to the EU-level) practices and procedures in this policy area. As we have seen from the history of the EU’s involvement in education has been marked by cooperation rather than harmonisation. Thus there is reason to argue that the OMC in the education sector represents a step up the ladder of European integration. However, information on the actual adjustment of the national policies according to these objectives is still very limited.

The independence of the OMC?

Acknowledging that the use of OMC has served as an enabling device for European integration efforts, one should be quick to add that the enabling of EU in the areas of research and education also is dependent of the legitimation not only of a method but of a world view. The discourse of the knowledge economy permits the EU to legitimately take a stronger interest in the knowledge sector and to set concrete and quantifiable target for collective achievements in these areas. The question of whether the OMC is an *independent* mode of governance on the other hand is not answerable on the basis of the current experiences. At this point it is timely to underline that it is hard to separate the introduction of OMC from the activities that was generated by the specific political ambition that was agreed upon in Lisbon 2000. A pertinent question to be asked is not only the independence of it from legal means (cf. 2.3) but its independence from the specific political context that named it. If, for instance, the overall Lisbon ambition fails it might disrepute the OMC as a viable new approach to governance in the EU and imply an ideological crisis of the idea of new governance (Zängle 2004:13). In the case of education the legitimacy for further coordination of educational policy in Europe might suffer from it, as some sort of guilt by association. It remains an open question whether the OMC processes can have a life outside the Lisbon process. Education as an object of policy co-ordination might be more at risk to the possible failure or fatigue and consequent loss of legitimacy in the Lisbon process and possible disillusionment when or if ambitious targets cannot be met. Judging from the difference in contexts of application, invigorating the EU’s involvement in research seems less vulnerable because it is positioned within a densely institutionalised set of various means of coordination and integration. Also the body that seems to have become the nucleus of the OMC process in research (CREST) has a permanent and chartered status, and not specific to the OMC/Lisbon process. In research, however, the method seems more squeezed between the intergovernmental big science

project, and increasing ambitions of the EU that goes much beyond a “third way” approach of the EU. The ambitions of the European Research Area may imply a further extraction of national resources for EU research activities, and also possible institution building at the European level if a European Research Council is established (Caswill 2003). Yet the ERA does not add *areas* of policy competencies to the European level but changes the mode of operation in this policy area as integration is no longer synonymous with redistribution of research funds through framework programmes alone (Edler 2003: 117). The rethinking of EU’s approach to research policy along the lines of integration through policy coordination is embedded not only in the application of the OMC but in the wider idea of the ERA (Banchoff 2003). That one might argue makes the viability of OMC research more susceptible to the success or failure of the ERA, than reliant on the performance of the overall Lisbon strategy. As with the Lisbon strategy the verdict of success or failure of the ERA has not yet been announced, but the ERA does build on a range of heavily institutionalised instruments in addition to the more innovative elements.

Dynamics of policy coordination

Already in the Lisbon 2010 mid-term review of the High Level Group led by Wim Kok we can see some indications of whether the OMC as a method is judged independently of the political process of the Lisbon strategy. In their report the method is indeed seen as a guilty party in terms of not “delivering Lisbon”. Kok’s report does not go on to further bash the method as such but calls for amplifying its assumed dynamics, i.e. more overt praise and castigating of performance on a few key indicators and clearer naming, shaming and faming (Kok 2004b)¹⁶. Their diagnosis is that the actors have failed to unleash the dynamics of the method. What can the emerging practices we have looked at in this paper tell us about the assumed dynamics of the OMC as a mode of governance? The OMC processes in research and education have undoubtedly made the European level collectively search for, gather and systematise information about the sectors. Decisions on indicators have been made initially on the existing data and categories. In this respect the existing “cognitive maps” found in the especially the OECD statistics and existing national statistics have fed the OMC processes. The work on statistical indicators have drawn on networks of expertise associated with these international arenas, and on the statistical work of EU’s own institutions, Eurostat and EURYDICE, and on the national statistical expertise. Yet the ambitions, especially in the area

¹⁶ “The open method of coordination has fallen short of expectations. If member states do not enter the spirit of benchmarking, little or nothing happens” (Kok 2004b: 42).

of education, have been to develop new categories and statistical indicators, and have instigated a search for new information and new studies that are adjusted to the specific needs of Lisbon as a political project.

Second, there is little doubt that the OMC as a method has served as a significant attention structuring device for those involved in the processes, especially national ministries, Competitiveness/Education Council and the Commission. That can be read both from the formal agendas of the meetings and in the numerous reports and publications that have been published in the name of OMC. How far this agenda setting capacity has left its mark on national education policy agendas is a matter that cannot be answered here. The national reports that have been the basis for the common reports produced for the Spring Council seem to represent occasions for national systems to learn about themselves and setting their research or educational systems performance in perspective with the performance of others. How much transfer of knowledge and policy *learning from the experience of others* that have occurred from the OMC processes so far is more debatable. Here we can only begin to argue that the attention structuring potential of the method seems stronger than the potential for learning from the experience of others.

Finally we note that the OMC processes in education and research show little evidence of overt use of the coordinating power of social sanctions. The formal documents that have been produced in the course of the processes have not underlined the peer reviewed identification of culprits and heroes. Also the proliferation of indicators makes most countries perform well on at least some indicators thereby blurring the sharp portrayal of high performers and non-performers. At present there are no official leagues tables or single composite indicator that can be used to shame individual countries into action. OMC in research and education have landed far from giving overt, public and country specific policy recommendations that in any way resemble what has been attempted as part of the policy coordination of the EMU (Meyer 2004). In this respect the conclusions from the Kok-report can be corroborated from the experiences of the OMC processes in these two sectors. On the other hand the coordinating capacity of naming and shaming might be so subtle that only more in-depth studies of OMC processes involved can uncover it.

5 *Endnote*

This paper has taken as a point of departure that the open method of coordination cannot solely be understood a general mode of governance, but one that is linked to a specific historical development, in the context of a specific political setting. The nature of the method is partly codified if we take the Lisbon conclusion definitions to represent the “authoritative definition” of the OMC. Also it is a mode of governance in the making and in the processes of acquiring institutional and organisational expressions that vary across settings in the European Union. When new institutions, practices and procedures are introduced they have to learn their place in the existing the political order (Olsen 2001). The emerging practices the OMC in research and education sketched out in this paper show that it is a mode of governance that is in the process of learning or taking its place in the political order of the EU and of the member states. In more specific terms we see for instance that the OMC process(es) in the research sector blend in with activities generated by the European Research Area and exiting bodies are charged with OMC responsibilities. The OMC process in education has entered an arena at the European level that is less institutionally and procedurally dense. The lessons learned might be that it has no place in that order, and that the activities and practices that the introduction of the OMC in the various practical settings will fizzle out. Or the lesson might be that once practices have come into place that such activities become standard operating procedures of the EU in certain areas, with or possibly without the “OMC” label attached to it. At the moment the OMC processes are “under construction” and should be studied accordingly.

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