Education reforms and youth transitions in Central Europe since 1989 – a case of Poland.

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Introduction

Since the late 1980s, the Central European (CE) countries of Slovakia and the Czech Republic (previously Czechoslovakia), Poland and Hungary have undergone significant political, economic and administrative changes. These changes have been driven by ideological and politico-economic shifts at the regional and state level, with previously centrally-planned economic models falling in favour of democratic restructuring and free-market objectives. Efforts to reform the countries’ respective education systems have taken place, relentlessly, at local, national and supra-national levels. Reforms in the first twenty-five years of decentralisation have variously reflected appeals to sovereign (re-nationalised) identity, decentralised governance, and deepening multi-lateral partnerships with organisations and governments to the geo-political west.

While CE countries each housed different economic organs and industries prior to democratisation, and are home to different ethnic and linguistic constitutions, they share some common transition-related themes which transpire from their experiences of late-20th Century regime change. Three fundamental commonalities are: decentralisation, accession into the European Union in 2004, and a shift from the organisation of education systems following an ‘employment-based logic’ – with curricula and enrolment quotas being closely related to industry needs (Hirst & Peters 1970) - towards an education or employment logic (Raffe 2008).

The adoption of a demand-driven and growth-promoting economic model has meant that the skills base promoted in the ‘new’ economies has undergone radical changes. These changes have waged an immense social impact, with more students deferring early specialisation by undertaking academic general schooling across the region. The proportional uptake of vocational secondary and technical schooling has suffered a drastic decline. Concurrently, in the early 21st Century the ‘success’ of Central European transitions is publicly judged via quantitative indicators of students’ school-to-work transitions (work status) and academic aptitude (numeracy, scientific capabilities and literacy).

Since extensive research was conducted on youth transition systems or ‘regimes’ in the early 21st Century (Gallie & Paugham 2000; Walther et al. 2002; Raffe 2003; Pohl & Walther 2007; Verdier 2009), there has been growing interest in youth transition studies in post-communist countries (Kogan et al. 2011; Baranowska-Rataj & Unt 2012). The available literature on the transition systems of the post-communist countries of Central Europe reveals that there is no single common type of transitional experience shared across the region (Cowen et al. 2000; Kogan et al. 2011; Baranowska-Rataj & Unt 2012). Furthermore, there is little research available on current youth transitions and vocational education in CE, which might shed light on the role of industry in skills provision in a contemporary context.
Poland is the largest of the CE economies and serves as an entrepreneur of EU norms and standards to the EU’s near neighbours (Klatt & Stepniewski 2012). Poland has stood out in recent years for its students’ PISA scores (see Table 1), as well as for the country’s reputation for supporting the development of a well-skilled, cost-effective, labour force (Jakubowski et al 2010). As a result of reform efforts, Poland has become one of the ‘rising stars in education’ (Hicks 2012), with a 95% school retention rate, and the fastest rate of economic growth in the EU backing this up. It has the lowest rate of early school leaving in Europe (Eurostat 2009) and is the only European country with significant growth in employment rates among recent graduates (Eurostat 2011).

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Table 1. Source: OECD 2000, 2009 and 2013a.

This massive shift in rankings has coincided with ‘academic drift’ away from vocational education. Notwithstanding international praise for its educational achievements, the youth unemployment rate in 2012, for young people aged 15-24, remained significant at 26.5% (OECD 2013b). The majority of those who have struggled to find work have been young people who have completed basic vocational programmes or do not possess secondary school qualifications.

In recognition of the complexities regarding supporting young people in their transition to further study or work during a period of rapid social and economic transition, this chapter will overview the three major reform phases undertaken in Central Europe since the late-1980s in order to analyse how Central European countries have tackled implementing supranational and national education reforms. Poland has been selected as a case study to illustrate the successes and weak points of the on-going system transformation. Post-communist phases of transition within Central Europe – herein referred to as ‘deconstruction’, ‘reconstruction’ and ‘Europeanisation’ – occurred over varied timeframes, sometimes overlapped, and were on many occasions uneven and incomplete. This is due to the extreme complexity of the processes which endure social, economic and political processes and constraints.

**The state of education in Central Europe prior to transition**

In the lead up to liberalisation, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were subject to highly-centralised governance, with societal and educational norms and standards disseminated from the inner circle of Soviet socialist ideology in Moscow. While care must be taken not to over-generalise about educational experiences in Central Europe prior to democratisation, some common experiences are both remembered and to be anticipated.
During the ‘communist’ period the schooling system in all three states was characterised by a typical three-tier structure: eight years of standardised and compulsory basic primary education; (2-4 year) basic vocational (apprenticeship); and (4 year) technical or (4 year) general/grammar schooling leading to maturity exam (matura; maturita) enabling access to university. Post-primary vocational schools and upper-secondary vocational education and training were the joint responsibility of the ministries of different economic sectors and education departments within an inefficient and highly-bureaucratised system.

As signatories to the Warsaw Pact (1955), the major aim of education became preparing young people for life and a job within a ‘developed socialist society’ and ‘for the defence of the socialist homeland’ (c.f. Greger & Walterova 2007: 19). Policies of ‘statistical justice’ (Štech 2008) sought to involve a greater diversity of social classes in society. The relationship between the state and industries before 1989 was strong and there was very little scope for ‘outside’ influence from international organisations or private interest groups. Exchange programmes were available for teachers, engineers and other professionals within the Soviet Union and its satellites, and workers also crossed national boundaries into ‘partnership’ countries further east to help realise Soviet plans for urbanisation and internationalisation.

Higher education represented an ‘elite’ track (Trow 1974), with usually 10-15% holding a tertiary-level degree (Zalai 1997). State policy did not place any emphasis on increasing the level of education for all citizens as many jobs required low level skillsets, and education and training were funded by the state. Relative advantages for children from privileged backgrounds were to be weakened, while higher education quotas aimed to privilege people of ‘worker stock’ (the proletariat) by applying ‘reverse discrimination’. Czechoslovakia was an example of continuous ‘reverse discrimination’ from 1948 to 1990 (Wong 1998). However, in reality the inequalities persisted (Hanley & McKeever 1997). There was a certain paradox to the system advocating social equality which was never achieved at the secondary school level – social background remained a strong factor in determining educational opportunities. Certain literature and pedagogy (e.g. Lev Vygotsky) was censored for reflecting ‘bourgeois elitism’. Teaching practice was based on the rigid and teacher-centred doctrine of socialist pedagogy, with the aim of building a developed communist society (Hejnicka-Bezwinska 2014). As a result, in 1980 in Hungary, for example, only 5% of students graduated from higher education and 15% graduated from upper-secondary (Jelentes 2006 cited in MEC 2008). Roughly 40% did not complete lower secondary schooling (Ibid), this fact perhaps highlighting the dilemma in insinuating that more years of education would address the root cause of under-employment (Foster 1965 in Jakubowski et al 2010). Similar numbers graduated in Czechoslovakia with 61% of the age cohort studying in vocational schools, 15% in gymnasiums and 20% in technical schools (Berend 2010: 271).

**Poland’s Socialist Education System (1945-1989)**

Since the loss of independence in the late eighteenth century, education in Poland had been closely aligned to nation-building. As with Hungary - where the role of religion and nationalism in educating young people was a politically-sensitive and prominent matter – Poland’s education programme involved a Roman-Catholic code of values (moral education) and emphasised ‘Polish-ness’ (national history, culture and identity). During World War 2 in Poland, thousands of teachers, members of the intelligentsia and professors were killed by the occupying German
and Soviet forces. In the same period, over 100,000 students were engaged in ‘underground’ schooling in Polish literature, language and history.

The main direction of post-WW2 education reform in Poland was asserted in 1945 and responded to the racialisation and patriotism of war-time European politics. It drew upon the education model provided by the Soviet regime (Moraczewska 2010) and aimed at promoting equity, literacy and non-sectarianism. The standardised curriculum and prescriptive teachers’ books (and workplaces) provided little space for supporting ‘innovation’, or application of the information acquired. Narrowly specialised basic vocational schools produced low-skilled workers to toil towards the achievement of five year central plans. Labour productivity rates were deemed less-important than involving all people in the development of a People’s Republic and almost roughly 50% of 15 year olds entered into basic vocational schools (OECD 2010: 224). Private schools were liquidated and religious orders lost their earlier right to organise educational activities. The duration of general education was shortened, and the logic underpinning education became driven by the immediate needs of the system.

In Poland, class-based selection into general academic senior secondary schools provided the children of peasants and workers with priority access. The stated rationale was that this would provide support to underprivileged children in the pursuit of further education (also in Hungary: MEC 2008). In practice, this held children from ‘elite’ backgrounds back from gaining a higher education, while only 10% of children from under-privileged backgrounds attended academic senior secondary schools and less than 5% completed university during the 1960s (Levitas & Herczyński 2012: 57). Despite education being held in high regard among the Polish society, many of those who sought quality vocational skills as well as an academic education were denied such an opportunity. For those who gained access to higher education, a textbook-centred approach to learning and rigid directives on pedagogy given to teachers aimed to ensure that students would be exposed to a provision that was authorised by, and acceptable to, the system’s policy makers. The overruling ideology, as well as the low-regard for ‘choice’ and ‘self-determination’ as compared to Poland’s current market system, prioritised full employment and society/industry-relevant schooling. The policy was an ideological and political instrument for eliminating any influence from, and growth of reach by, intellectual and business elites of the time.

By 1990, approximately 22% of the relevant age cohort progressed through a general academic secondary school track while over 70% of young people graduated from vocational tracks (IBE 2011). To address what emerged as educational insufficiencies under the more deregulated competition and choice-driven market economy that was Poland’s future, Poland – like other CE countries newly severed from Soviet influence – had to embark upon deep structural, curricular, economic and ideological reforms at a scale previously unknown to the region. By length and complexity, Poland embarked upon implementing one of the most-extensive education reform agendas of all OECD and EU countries. These reforms led Poland to be recognised in the late-2000s by the OECD as a model reformer and highly-educated nation (OECD 2010, OECD 2012). This process began with the first step in transition: de-construction.

**De-construction - the first transition**

Policy reforms in the post-communist countries of Central Europe were fuelled by the decision to de-construct the communist system (Jakubowski et al 2010: 80-109). Čerych et al. (cited in Greger & Walterova 2007) called this ‘a period of annulation or correction’ (). The main task was to transform the preceding system by de-ideologising the curricula and policies regulating
education management and provisions. This involved school privatisation, re-introducing religious schools and foreign languages into school curricula, and deregulating student enrolment quotas. This process of de-construction started at different times in different countries, with the Solidarnosć workers’ movement seeking to recuperate Polish values from the early 1980s and Hungary’s reins on centralisation noticeably loosening from 1979, while Czechoslovakia officially farewelled communism in 1991 and became two separate republics in 1993. The initial work demanded the reorganisation of the economic and political system which was achieved with massive input from the geopolitical West. The notion of a ‘return to Europe’ dominated the policies of post-communist Central Europe - this ‘return’ largely reflecting the desire to ‘leap forward to the achievements of post-war Western Europe’ (Snyder 2003: 290) rather than to recoup remnants of pre-war life. The desire, informed by理想ised imagery of Western democracy, was expressed through the re-introduction of capitalist modes of production, distribution and consumption. What characterised all Central European countries at that time was de-centralisation and democratisation, and ‘learning from elsewhere’ was becoming a central tenet of educational transformation (Birzea 1994 cited in Silova 2009). Specific country transition programmes were developed to provide assistance, including the OECD’s ‘Partners in Transition’ programme. The emphasis fell on dismantling what was in place rather than assisting educationalists and students to make choices about their futures and opening up educational systems to the outside world (Birzea 2008). The uncertainties of the ‘double transition’ faced by employment-seeking youth in post-communist countries were exacerbated still by the changing political map and associated instability, with Tito’s Yugoslavia violently morphed into separate states and the two majority nations within Czechoslovakia.

Not only was decentralisation expected to encourage innovation and competition under the right conditions, but decentralisation was promoted as having a democratising effect: the concentration of influence in the hands of a few would lessen, and more diverse voices would be empowered to be heard and to hear. Similar reasoning underlines the promotion of student-centred learning, whereby the teacher (the ‘fountain of knowledge’) ceases to act in only one direction towards her/his pupils – a model which was not appropriate under the Soviet model of centralised curriculum, planning and methodology. The Czech Republic and Hungary, deemed by the OECD to have been open and willing to engage with international development workers on policy analysis and reform since the early-1990s, also achieved rapid movement towards free market economy, including in the sphere of education (OECD 1997). In 1995 the European Roundtable on Trade regretted that:

‘in most of the European countries, schools are integrated in a centralised public system, controlled by a bureaucracy that slows down their evolution and makes them not permeable to the demands coming from outside’ (ERT 1993 in Hirtt 2001).

The call for greater flexibility through autonomy was articulated by the European Commission, and through Eurydice, in the same year: ‘the central question now is how to move towards greater flexibility in education and training systems’ (European Commission (1995) cited in Hirtt 2001). Eurydice emphasised the international character of the movement towards deregulation, decentralisation and autonomy (Ibid 2001). These influences played a significant role in shaping the character of education systems in these new democracies. The recessional period following rapid privatisation in the onset of democratisation and market liberation led to high unemployment and the need to create a welfare system in order to protect vulnerable citizens. Foreign direct investment, conditional loans and development programmes assisted in the ad hoc decentralisation and diversification of schools, methodologies and learning resources, and contributed to the shift towards education reforms becoming more influenced by international [and/or] business interests.
Following the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, de-construction took place during trying social and economic times, with growing social differentiation, a decrease in demand for skilled labour, economic decline and fewer kindergartens. The deregulation of kindergartens had flow-on effects for what would need to be taught during later years, the availability of parents to work, and employment opportunities for early childhood teachers. Russian ceased to be the official second language of Slovaks and Czechs in 1993 (OECD 1997), scientific atheism was cut from the pedagogical faculties of universities, and school management shifted towards self-governance. Civic education and history curricula were also updated, filling in the ‘white spots’ of national history. In Slovakia, teaching strategies in primary and secondary schools were influenced by NGO reform efforts to instil the principles of democratisation within school curricula (e.g. Project Orava) through Integrative Thematic Instruction and Step by Step programmes (Kosova & Porubsky 2007). Western notions of ‘best practice’ wielded strong influence over public opinion (Ibid, p.112) and stimulated the objectives of the 1994 Konstantin (Constantine) Policy which laid out a 10 year vision for achieving European Standards such as extending higher education enrolments to 30%, increasing adult learner rates (from 7% to 10.7%), and increasing high school retention (from 40% to 80%) (Zelina 2005 in Kosova & Porubsky 2007: 112). Public spending on education in the Czech Republic rose after 1989 and peaked in 1995 (by GDP). Public schools increasingly featured the delivery of flexible programmes and competences across post-communist Central Europe, with teachers requiring less subject knowledge and more ‘soft’ skills, as their general role and teaching materials were re-defined.

System de-construction in Poland

Emerging out of communist structures, the Poles were well-aware that years of centralisation had brought them unyielding economic, political and social ‘backwardness’ when compared to the dynamism of Western markets. As part of the OECD ‘Partners in Transition’ programme the review of the Polish education system was undertaken. The resulting report from the OECD delivered in 1995 supposedly inspired the whole system reforms implemented by Education Minister Mirosław Handke (1997-2000). While the market had to be re-established, the Poles were deeply-convinced that communism had a lesser impact upon their level of cultural and educational development (Dabrowski & Wisniewski 2001). This was not reflected in the OECD study, which depicted large proportions of the adult population of Poland as demonstrating low rates of literacy (OECD 1995: xiii). Both the validity and reliability of this survey were queried during a subsequent uproar in Poland (Dabrowski & Wisniewski 2001). Beyond the survey, the international reputation of Poland’s labour force was tarnished by low rates of higher education completion in comparison to high graduation rates from basic vocational schools – a legacy of the previous economic system.

From the early 1990s, Poland’s educational policies – and its social and economic system more broadly - have been reoriented towards building a competitive knowledge economy with foreign assistance, following a ‘Western’ model of strategic development revealed through the European Round Table of Industrialists in 1989 (Hirtt 2001), the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), the OECD’s Venice Conference on decentralising employability (1999) and the Lisbon Agenda (1999) (Hirtt 2001).

1 The ‘world’s first large-scale, comparative assessment of adult literacy’ (OECD 1995) was held in 1994 and involved 9 countries, including Poland.
The first domestic strategic reform to have enormous impact on Poland’s education system concerned decentralisation from the Ministry of National Education to the regional authorities in early 1990. The process of decentralisation started immediately, despite local authorities and educationalists voicing their concerns over such instant and challenging changes. These alterations were not driven by an educational rationale, but rather by the obligation to dismantle the former political apparatus (Birzea 1996): the emphasis was on destroying rather than creating or reforming. As the centralised bureaucracy remained in the control of the ‘old regime’ public service, the public and newly-elected former opposition representatives felt that the only way to reform the system was to devolve responsibilities, including of schools, to local authorities who were mostly members of Solidarity. In this way, changes to the education system were more than merely the consequence of the overall systematic political, economic and democratic changes; they arguably reinforced the system change. Once local authorities were made responsible for funding and managing local schools, they had to deal with the immediate needs of school children and teachers. Decisions had to be made, and inexperienced, freely-elected governments had to implement rules and procedures relating to education provision as quickly and effectively as possible given the circumstances. Formal education was not only to play a supporting role in the system transition, but education reform at such a scale may be argued to be equally as hard-hitting as economic and political changes.

Simultaneously, what Bodine (2005) termed ‘radical decentralisation’ was spreading across Poland. This occurs when authority is granted to non-state actors to establish and operate schools, reminiscent of charter schools in the USA or free schools in the UK. This process enjoyed high levels of popularity in Poland as parents and community groups, energised by the post-communist ‘emancipation culture’ (Kennedy in Bodine 2005), sought to claim their freedom to choose their children’s school. Such acts of choice were fuelled by rebellion against the constraints of the preceding school system and, without this context, may not have seemed so appealing in and of themselves, given their for-profit status and more limited monitoring procedures. As new schools opened, many small regional schools shut down as a result of limited funds being made available to local authorities. Beyond compulsory schooling, 30% of preschools were closed between 1990 and 1999 (Herbst 2008). Rates of student drop-out rose, with financially difficulties and material shortages affecting many as employment rates declined and teachers’ salaries dropped in real terms, triggering the emergence of paid tutoring and potentially some grade tampering. Teaching lost status as a profession, while wage rates and continuous (re-)learning rendered the profession undesirable in the context of rapidly-growing wage differentiation.

**Structural reforms – Second Transition**

Following initial de-centralisation, waves of structural education reforms came through Central Europe.

In the early 1990s in Hungary, three major acts influenced the operation, organisation and management of the reconstruction-phase schools. Acts were passed on public education (LXXIX 1993 in MEC 2008) and vocational education and training (LXXVI 1993 in MEC 2008), and higher education, each of which later being amended in response to economic and political constraints, waves, international conventions, the state constitution, and shifting political and ideological agendas upheld by governments under the new system of democracy. The Public

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2 In contrast to this, prior to 1989, institutes of education in Czechoslovakia had been financed according to the targets by public enterprises or the ministries, rather than by the number of students enrolled.
Education Act stated students’ rights to eight years of schooling followed by fee-free secondary (general) or vocational schooling - compulsory schooling covering ISCED 0-3 stages, running from ages 5 to 18. A core curriculum, to be revised three-yearly, was introduced in 1998, and university entrance exams were introduced. Centrally-accredited textbooks were subsidised, and employers’ professional representative bodies provided input into curricular development and professional examination procedures (MEC 2008: 19).

In the second phase of transition in the Czech Republic referred to as ‘partial stabilisation’ (Kotásek, Greger & Procházková 2004 in Greger & Walterova 2007), many ad hoc operational changes were made alongside ‘bottom-up reform’ and innovation. Education reform proposals were prepared by private firms such as NEMES, PAU and IDEA (Greger & Walterova 2007). The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport’s first programme for education reform was called ‘Quality and Accountability’ (1994) and reflected a shift towards longer-term visions. The state began to steer reform efforts from the mid-1990s and the Czech Republic joined international studies of student achievement, including TIMSS in 1995 and PISA in 2000, as well as other OECD projects. Tertiary professional schools were established from 1992/3 as offering an alternative post-secondary education that had not previously existed. The Education Act recognised them as part of the education system during an experimental phase (1991-5), and by 2006-7 there were 174 tertiary professional schools in the Czech Republic (114 state, 48 private, 12 religious) that offered programmes leading to diplomas. Entry was an option for students who had completed their maturitní zkouška (Greger & Walterova 2007). The Czech Republic was characterised by reform debates in the 1990s which variously toyed with neoliberal (individualist) and social state (collective) values for education, and oscillation between discontinuity and continuity plagued the transition (Birzea 1996 and Greger & Walterova 2007: 18). Presently, the Czech Republic hosts a highly-differentiated education system with very early tracking posing equity and access concerns (OECD 2011).

**Structural Reforms - Poland**

As in other CE countries, efforts were made in Poland to raise the overall level of education through education reform. Significantly, frequent government changes did not create a stable environment for designing a long-term education reform strategy. A public official from the Ministry of Education interviewed by the authors in 2013 for the purpose of this paper, and who assisted several Ministers in implementing structural reforms in the 1990s, believed that political and economic unpredictability did not encourage education reforms on a large scale, particularly without the support of educators and teachers:

‘During the first years, very frequent government turnover – there was not even time to prepare strategies. There has been certain stability under Handke, because he was a Minister long enough. The education has never had obvious, explicit goals. Secondly, there was a widespread belief that education sector would not tolerate rapid changes so we have to take a slow approach to reforms. Thirdly, there was no such pressure like in the economy. They have already re-introduced ‘white spots’ in history curriculum and opened the possibility of creating non-public schools. Teachers were not big supporters of change, and this is a very large and influential group of voters. In the 90s a large representation of the Teachers Union was in parliament. So there was this type of thinking among politicians – do not antagonise teachers because they will discourage parents. There was no enthusiasm for change.’
Finally, in the late 1990s with stable decentralised local governance and a profound demographic turn, the favourable conditions and political will were created to introduce reforms on a larger scale. The financial cost of reforms was acceptable for the Financial Minister Leszek Balcerowicz as the forthcoming declining numbers of school children due to demographic conditions reduced the totals costs. In May 1998, the proposals for reform were announced by the Minister for Education, Mirosław Handke, to be based on three objectives:

- Universal education at the secondary level, and a marked increase in the number of tertiary entries,
- Equal opportunities in access to education at various levels,
- Improving the quality of education by ensuring an appropriate balance between the knowledge transfer, providing skills and shaping youth character and thus the integration of education and upbringing (Interview 2013).

The third objective is interesting as it reveals that ‘quality of education’ was defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and ‘good character’, placing responsibility on schools for education and upbringing. Minister Handke, interviewed by the authors in 2013, explained that he proposed that all schools would be autonomous; however, the values the schools represented should be known upfront:

‘In this reform each school is gaining autonomy but will need to develop an educational program evident for all the parents. If you want to have Mahometian culture - go ahead but make sure all parents are aware of it. You see, education cannot be detached from a value system. This is one of the elements of this reform.’

Handke advocated building strong links between schools and parents as well with local catholic parishes. In his opinion, catholic values should be integrated in to community through local catholic schools (Handke 2009). This approach was highly criticised - mostly by the opposition and the secular media (Gazeta Wyborcza 1998) – and was removed from the reform by consequence. In 1999, a structural reform was officially implemented with primary school converted into a six year programme with two different stages of education (integrated and block), and three year gimnazjum was created as a lower secondary school extending the compulsory general schooling by one year, preceding tracked upper-secondary school. Unlike in Hungary (or the Czech Republic\(^3\)) where gymnasiums traditionally provided an elite academic programme, in Poland they offered general secondary schooling. Students were tracked into academic or vocational upper-secondary schools following nine years of compulsory general schooling in a system which resembled some in Western Europe. Structural changes were accompanied by curricular and financial reforms. The concept of core curriculum was developed, the curricula aiming to provide schools with extensive scope for autonomy and local responsibility: that is, teachers were endowed with professional discretion and greater co-authorship over how they would teach and through what examples. Delaying vocationalism by one year arguably played a significant role in high

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\(^3\) Czech students can take an exam for entry into a select-entry multi-year gymnasium at the age of 11, leading successful students through a pre-university track from a young age. The Czech Republic’s elite system of schooling in which the family background effect has an especially high impact upon student performance by OECD standards (Greger & Walterová 2007). The impact of socio-economic background in the Czech Republic on PISA performance stood at 37% (PISA 2003 results in Greger & Walterová 2007) - the 7\(^{th}\) highest in the sample area. Because members of the public fought to maintain elite gymnasiums, the structure is unlikely to change despite international criticism.
performance among Polish students in the PISA tests of 2009 and 2012 (Jakubowski et al 2010). External examinations and tests, to be taken upon the completion of primary and lower-secondary stages of education, were introduced and to be overseen by an assessment board. This arguably helped shape what teachers would teach and how, despite the loosening of Soviet-style textbook-centred approach to schooling, as their competence as pedagogues would be judged against their students’ success as is common in NAPLAN, PISA and TIMSS regimes.

Poland’s performance in mathematics, science and reading-based PISA examinations between 2000 and 2012 was widely reported as a victory for the reforms and the policy trends being followed since the late-1990s. Subsequent research conducted by Jakubowski et al (2010) concluded that: i) benefits in student performance were related to the extension of basic education to a 9 year program, ii) the role of parents’ education is significant in PISA results, and that iii) reading results were the only ones to be ‘fully comparable across PISA cycles’ (Jakubowski et al 2010, p. 16), with Poland reaching the OECD average by 2003 and exceeding it in 2006. The reform, outlined in 1998 by the Ministry, formally set out to increase educational attainments, provide equal opportunities in education, and improve the quality of education (via methodology, new core curricula, exams). Gymnasia were anticipated to improve the level of educational attainment in rural areas hosting smaller schools (Jakubowski et al 2010). Dividing general schooling into two stages helped provide differentiated training to teachers working with different age cohorts, and structural reform was imposed alongside curricula reform so that ‘conservative’ teachers would have to embrace reform: teaching an old way in a new school could be difficult (Ibid 2010: 5).

Of Central and Eastern Europe’s PISA participants, Poland is the only one to have improved consistently over time. The Czech Republic’s results declined and Hungary’s were quite stagnant, with considerable gaps in performance between the highest and lower performers fuelling criticism about equal opportunities and access within the country’s education system. On an index of equitable education across the EU, Poland (9th), Slovakia (7th) and the Czech Republic (5th) ranked well, while Hungary came 18th and Slovakia was rendered the second most ‘elitist’ at 27th (Schraad-Tischler & Kroll 2014).

The above data point to the success in reforming ‘academic’ education and equity in access to education in Poland. However, the reforms implemented in 1999 completely abandoned the vocational education track. The reforms resulted in the closure of 6,000 vocational schools and a collapse of relations between vocational schools and industry (Kabaj 2010). It had negative consequences for the whole vocational and training system including financial, curricular, pedagogic and labour market issues. A very low status given to vocational education, declining quality of skill training, limited access to upskilling and problematic transitions to meaningful work contrasted with more occupationalised labour markets like Germany where completed training in a recognised occupation is a basic prerequisite for taking up qualified employment (Skrobanek et. al 2011).

**Europeanisation – the third transition**

The historic date of 1 May 2004, when CE countries joined the EU, marks an important turning point in their turbulent history. EU enlargement (2004-) is at the heart of another transformation ‘from national sovereignty to community membership’ (Halasz 2007) and knowledge society priorities. Education in European countries had always been seen as a national affair; education systems and the educational objectives had been closely related
with a nation’s history, political system and location. In the current globalised world, the influence of EU processes on EU member states has been unquestionable.

In recent years, Europeanisation has become a term commonly used in international relations, social sciences, and particularly in European studies to explain multi-layered and interlinked policy-making in the EU. The concept of Europeanisation has been popular among the scholars of European studies. Europeanisation is in an important part formed by ‘the transnationalism and the interdependence of the EU and of national administrative and governance systems’ which transform both the EU and the member states (Murray 2009: 227-244). These transformations create an extensive area for the research of power and influence in the EU.

In the context of education policy, Europeanisation occurs at a national level where national political structure, administration, policy processes and policies are being ‘oriented into the European direction’ (Nugent 2006: 523). The ‘national adaptation’ is understood as a change of position or policy problem resulting from participation in the common EU decision making, in particular through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). OMC is the EU’s method of governance applied in politically sensitive policy matters, such as education. OMC is a promising Europeanisation instrument as its mechanisms are based on learning and knowledge diffusion. The official from the Polish Ministry of Education representing Poland during the EU Council meetings clearly explained the ‘soft mechanisms’ influencing national policies:

‘Although “hard instruments” of the EU Treaty do not include education, we are bound by a gentlemen’s agreement to act on the negotiated regulations or benchmarks. Of course a non-compliance does not bring splendour and, of course, there are other benefits if they judge us positively in Europe’ (Interview May 2013).

Global trends, including the strong relevance of the OECD, guide the objectives of national policy-making in many countries. Grek et al (2009) have argued that the EU is a ‘friendlier face of globalisation’ as it offers quality assurance frameworks and guidelines on ‘best practice’ without interfering with national curriculum standards. Indeed, it provides a platform for discussion, exchange of ideas, and a space where smaller, less powerful nation states can raise their voices.

Multiple developments in education policy in the EU - the Lisbon Strategy in particular - are founded on human capital theory and the task of developing Europe into ‘the world’s most competitive and dynamic, knowledge-based economic area’ (European Council 2000). The advancement of education as an economic priority by governments around the world indicates that the field is perceived to hold potential social and economic returns that have become more difficult to achieve through policy instruments available in the pre-globalisation era. For the CE nation-states, these global and European policy influences have resulted in another transition which has been transforming their economic, social and educational policies (Birzea 2008). European Structural Funds have been recurrently utilised in CE countries.

**Europeanisation - Poland**
Since joining the EU, Poland’s policies have been re-oriented towards building a competitive knowledge economy and following the European Union’s directions. The Polish universities have adjusted their study structure to the 3+2+3 year model laid out by the Bologna Process and most-closely resembling the UK model. Teaching standards have been adjusted to qualifications requirements already implemented in the EU countries for regulated professions. A policy shift towards emphasising learning outcomes more so than inputs has been introduced to schools and higher education institutes in line with the European Qualifications Framework. Poland explicitly stresses the role of the National Qualification Framework as an instrument for national reform: the learning outcome approach is seen as providing an instrument for increasing the coherence, quality and relevance of education and training. A proposal for a comprehensive Polish qualifications system based on the Polish Qualifications Framework (PQF) was approved and adopted in 2011, and has become part of a broader reform, seeking to modernise Polish qualifications at all levels and in all subsystems. Poland’s consecutive governments have followed a neoliberal approach consistent with the main line of reasoning behind the reforms. The Strategy for Development of Education to Year 2013 clearly stated that ‘a role of education (…) in achieving the Lisbon objectives is unquestionable’ (MEN 2007).

Significantly, Poland as well as other CE countries not only adjusted to the EU regulations, but played a role in informing EU-wide education policy. Poland’s 2011 Presidency was a vital channel for influencing EU education policies. The education priorities of the Polish Presidency included: mobility for learning purposes, university system modernisation, intensification of the implementation of language competences and continuing action on lifelong learning, including adult education. The special team for co-ordinating the Presidency within the Ministry of National Education was established in 2008. The staff underwent specialist training – provided by a consortium of three foreign training institutes - in the practical aspects of participation by Polish governmental administration in the decision-making process of the EU. As a result of the changes required for Poland to assume the Presidency of the Council, the rigid decision-making process within the Ministries has been transformed (Interview May 2013). Changes within the Ministry allowed more flexibility for Ministry officials participating in negotiations at the EU level.

During its Presidency, several final documents on education were adopted: a declaration concerning the promotion of language, learning and multilingualism; a declaration concerning mobility in the new generation of EU educational programmes; and also conclusions concerning increasing the efficiency of tools supporting the competencies of young people. One of the education-relevant initiatives of the Polish Presidency related to Poland’s well-established foreign policy objectives – namely, strengthening cooperation with the EU’s eastern neighbours. A conference entitled ‘Eastern Dimension of Mobility’ provided a new contribution to the European Neighbourhood Policy, especially by emphasising the significance of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Special attention was paid to the mobility of students, teachers, academics, young people and businesses from the sporting and cultural sectors. The idea behind the conference was to engage with the EaP countries and listen to their expectations, and included representatives of the relevant ministries, universities, research centres, national agencies of EU programmes, students and teachers’ associations from the Eastern neighbourhood. The conference led to a debate on the EU forum to discuss the ways the EaP initiative could strengthen the development of the instruments fostering mobility between the EU and the EaP countries. It concluded with adopting the official Council Conclusions on the eastern dimension of youth participation and mobility (2011/C 372/03) which invited the Commission and the member states to develop mobility programs and exchange opportunities that include young people from all across Europe.
The Council Presidency in 2011 enabled Poland to not only advance the education policy of all EU member states, but also to engage countries outside the EU with the objective of increasing the educational opportunities of young people from the Eastern neighbourhood.

The process of Europeanisation and the OMC enabled CE countries to not only model their system on their western European counterparts, but be part of the EU system where they can play an active role in shaping thinking about education policy in Europe.

**Conclusion**

Since 1989 and the beginning of rapid changes to education systems and structures, Central Europe has reached some stability - although many aspects of education are still in-flux. The main challenges for all CE countries relate to enhancing the equality of educational opportunity and bringing down youth unemployment rates. There are also issues related to ‘brain-drain’ with many young and well-educated professionals migrating to more-developed economies of Western Europe.

After two decades of persistent reform efforts built atop the dismantled socialist system and subsequent efforts to borrow policy from other western democracies, a long-term educational vision is needed. One solution might lie in education policy that is constructed on the basis of internal references, local desires, and a long-term vision of where the region wants its future to look like and its citizens to become. The uncertainties faced by students, and reform fatigue faced by education sector employees, deny both the chance to flourish in their chosen fields and to share their learning journeys without regular feelings of bitterness, frustration and flailing hope. Where teachers were previously highly valued as professionals and role models, and students were tasked with building a ‘brave new world’ and awarded for excellence, a system of motivations centred upon credentialism, competition between classmates for limited jobs, higher wages and a fear of unemployment presents a sharp shift in realities. Where reforms since the 1980s have contributed to new political (pro-democratic), economic (deregulation, labour ‘market’) and social (access, equity under EU banner) conditions, many have neglected internal reference points such as traditions, beliefs and organisations (Silova 2009). Following Central Europe’s multi-decade pre-occupation (and more recent disillusionment) with the EU, pre-emptive production and discussion of historically-, socially- and economically-contextualised research into global-local policy interfaces and phenomena may serve to anticipate the next phase and how it might position local youths (labour) of diverse backgrounds in relation to capital and a means of economic and social development into the future. In a time of supra-national policy priorities, production and reform financing, such (open) discussions and consultations should be most effective if they take place ahead of transitional shifts such as those outlined within this paper.

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