Where are we on the role of the OECD as a global player in education?
Vera G. Centeno (UTA) & Íris Santos (UTA)

Time: Thursday 15 November 2018 at 12.45–14.15
Place: C7, Main building

The symposium brings together current leading studies on the OECD. It provides an updated picture of the contemporary research controversies, viewpoints and findings about the role of the OECD in the education arena. The six presentations cover the entire lifespan of the organization and different areas of the OECD’s educational activities. The symposium’s aim is to enable a better and comprehensive understanding of how and why the OECD secures its powerful position.

The first paper addresses the question of how to make sense of the OECD. It provides an encompassing picture of the organization by presenting the OECD’s three overlapping constitutive dimensions of actor, arena and instrument. The second presentation tackles the historical link between education and economy. It stresses the development of the OECD first education accountability system (INES) and its impact on Australian and Danish education policies. The third and fourth studies continue to look at the OECD history in order to illuminate present developments. The previous focuses on the relationships between the OECD and Brazil and China, as to understand how the OECD is affecting non-member countries policies. The latter concentrates on the knowledge on higher education generated by the OECD as well as on the knowledge provided by the previous (academic) research on the OECD, while analyzing the philosophical and epistemological views underlying these forms of knowledge. The last two papers approach the OECD’s major contemporary endeavour: PISA. However, they do not focus on commonplace discussions about PISA. The fifth paper reveals how PISA is used in Finnish media debates in order to push particular stances, while the last paper explores whether PISA is affecting the use of reference societies in domestic policy arenas.
Programme

The symposium is composed of six short presentations (10 minutes) followed by the discussant’s comments (5-10 minutes). The remaining time will be dedicated to questions and discussion with the audience.

*How can the OECD be studied? A look at the OECD’s three overlapping constitutive Dimensions* (Vera G. Centeno, UTA, Finland)

The OECD is among the major producers of education knowledge. However, little is known about the organization itself, and what makes this international governmental organization capable of holding such powerful position. A challenging question is: how can the OECD be studied? Drawing on interviews and unpublished internal documents, the paper argues that a textured understanding of the OECD’s three overlapping constitutive dimensions is needed.

The dimension of policy actor addresses the question of what gives the OECD the capability of producing legitimated knowledge. Three essential features make up this capability: the OECD Secretariat; the organization’s profile and working methods; and its multilateral analyses.

The dimension of arena tackles the questions of what the OECD’s institutional setting characteristics are and how do they impact its work. The organization’s internal dynamics and institutional specificities call attention for the intricacies of the OECD. It is important to look at the ‘actors within the actor’ and the complexity of the OECD’s in-house environment.

The dimension of instrument seeks to answer the question of how the organization is embedded in its external environment. The OECD operates in a broader political context with which it must interact. It is as an interactive and reactive player, which can also be instrumental.
Ever since its inception in 1961 the OECD has made a link between education and economic concerns. This link must be viewed in light of the context of the cold war in general and the so-called Sputnik shock in 1957 in particular. Education came to be viewed as a production factor with the potential of contributing positively to nations’ gross domestic product. Simultaneously came also increasing concerns about the efficiency and accountability of education systems. Thus, the educational sphere started to become influenced by other concerns than pedagogy, didactics, educational ideals and nationbuilding which had hitherto dominated education in many countries. A core development on the OECD-driven path of increased accountability of education systems was the establishment of the International Indicators and Evaluation of Educational Systems (INES) programme; a precursor of the contemporary PISA.

It is the purpose of this paper to historically and comparatively investigate the role and importance of selected OECD policy initiatives and programmes in terms of impact on selected memberstates’ accountability policies in education. The main programme to be treated is the INES programme and the member-states selected are Denmark and Australia. From this analytical platform the paper points out some recurring characteristics of OECD-driven accountability policies in education and raises a discussion of the implications in terms educational accountability.
Since the establishment of the OECD in 1961, the organisation has focused on the inclusion and cooperation of non-member states in its initiatives (OECD, 1960; Ougaard, 2010). This is also the case within the education policy field; a well-known example is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in which 72 countries participated in 2015. Likewise, the OECD programme called “Enhanced Engagement” (2007) had the goal of strengthening the cooperation with five “key partners”: Brazil, China, India, Indonesia and South Africa (Clifton & Fuentes, 2014; OECD, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between OECD and non-member states within the field of education exemplified by two countries: China and Brazil. Where Brazil is particularly interesting because its government has continuously aligned educational policies with OECD recommendations and has applied for membership in 2017 (OECD, 2018) the case of China is different. With the launch of the “open door” policy in 1978 and the turn towards a more market-oriented economy, the Chinese education system have been increasingly influenced by global actors and organisations (Guo & Guo, 2016; Schulte, 2016).

The paper takes a historical approach and is empirically based on an analysis of documents collected in the archives of the OECD as well as the national archives of China and Brazil in 2017-2018. The paper will contribute to our understanding of the powerful role the OECD has gained in global education policy-making and the role international organizations play in the global education field.
An account of the research into the OECD work on higher education and its underlying epistemological premises (Johanna Kallo, University of Turku, Finland)

The paper discusses the work of the OECD in the field of higher education, focusing on the organisation’s history, its agenda of higher education and the account of previous research (e.g. Hunter, 2013; Wende, 2011; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Higher education has been in the midst of the OECD’s educational agenda since the inauguration of the organisation. It has seen to have grown in importance within the OECD until the early 2000s, which is to a significant degree due to its expansion (Schuller & Vincent-Lancrin, 2009) but also to its redefined role in the knowledge economy (Henry et al., 2001). In recent years, however, the number of studies on higher education has evidently dropped as the OECD’s emphasis has shifted particularly to the development of educational assessments.

The paper examines the OECD from within by revisiting the vast interview data of the earlier research as well as by reviewing more recent accounts of the OECD work on higher education (e.g. Kallo, 2009; Shahahan, 2016; Shahjahan & Madden 2015; Kallo & Semchenko, 2016; Kallo 2017). Special attention is paid to the philosophical and epistemological thoughts underlying the OECD work on higher education and previous (academic) research into the OECD (e.g. OECD, 2008). The paper also sets out some thoughts as to why consideration of these epistemological viewpoints grounded in philosophy of science is relevant not only for the research on the role of the OECD but also more generally in the field of educational policy studies.
This study examines the Finnish media debate surrounding the OECD-led PISA Study during 2001-2009 and 2013-2014. The empirical focus of the study is on how debaters dissatisfied with Finnish education have justified their criticism in the context of debating PISA and how the justifications used have changed as Finland’s PISA ranking has changed.

The study argues, as Finland’s ranking in PISA 2012 apparently deteriorated, this lend great support to the critical arguments voiced in public in Finland. Criticism no longer needed to be based on the proclamation in public of the international success of the Finnish education which had previously been an integral part of the PISA discussion. Instead it sufficed to note the deterioration in Finland’s PISA ranking. This poorer ranking was used as a weapon when proposing what various reforms Finland should undertake. What was an especially great help in publicising such views was that the national political elite, which had long succeeded in dominating the national public PISA discussion, were unable in the face of the changed ranking to offer plausible explanations for this change in the ranking or to propose what measures should be undertaken in consequence. That is, the obvious decline in the PISA ranking and the inability of the previously so well placed political elite to take over the public debate on the changed PISA rankings opened up negotiating space for a critical discussion on education for which there had been decidedly less room in the earlier publicity surrounding PISA.
Inspirations from abroad: the use and construction of reference societies in education
(Iris Santos, UTA, Finland)

International organisations and their assessment tools have been steering education policy increasingly in nation states. The OECD has earned the status of expert through the development and implementation of PISA. PISA has instigated policy debates aimed at improving education systems’ quality and efficiency in a broad range of countries. PISA’s high-performing countries have become tools of empirical knowledge, used to legitimise or de-legitimise domestic education policies. They have become ‘reference societies’.

This study aims to analyse whether and to what extent PISA has a constitutive role in the (re)construction of these reference societies. Conducting a meta-analysis of scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles, we identified two main roles of PISA in the (re)construction of reference societies. The survey builds, but also triggers, the collapse of the reference societies used in national education debates. However, there are also cases in which PISA has little or no influence on which countries are used as references. The domestic processes of reference societies’ choice emerge as more nuanced than first expected. This contribution provides a firm basis for much needed further research on the topic.

Chair and discussant: Jaakko Kauko (UTA, Finland)